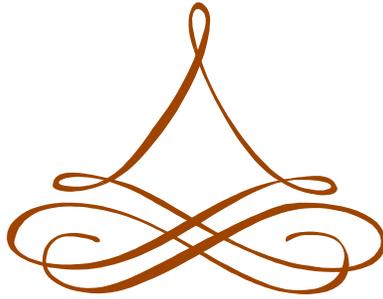


A DIRTY OLD MAN HANGS ON



**A Real-Time Look
At Christian Grief
John Cowart's 2013 Diary**



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John W. Cowart

Bluefish Books



**Cowart Communications
Jacksonville, Florida**

www.bluefishbooks.info

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data has been applied for. Lulu Press
14347997

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To Ginny



The Brains Behind This Dirty Old Man

A Dirty Old Man Hangs On

First, a step back into 2012. That's when we first noticed Ginny's death starting. We'd been married almost 45 years.

Monday, October 22, 2012 In The Sex Clinic

I saw Crystal's phone number thumbtacked to a corkboard with a message to call her at the Sex Clinic for a “private consultation”. I copied her number, called, and made an appointment. I felt could use a private consultation with Crystal.

Turns out that the Sex Clinic is in the same medical building as Dr. Downey's office where Ginny had a routine appointment Friday. Dr. Downey is our long-term physician, so while he examined Ginny and set up her x-rays, I walked down the hall to the Sex Clinic for my “private consultation” with Crystal.

Turned out to be not so private. The clinic's sex team of physicians, technicians and nurses tested me.

Using an extensive battery of hi-tech medical equipment tests including catalytic converters, ohm meters, laser-tag pointers, blood pressure cuffs, regulation police handcuffs (Crystal has read *50 Shades Of Grey*), Alien Rectal Probes, digital thermometers, CPR, MRI, PSA, and MTV, they tested me.

At the end of their extensive tests, these medical professionals concluded that—get this—they concluded that I am old.

Alas, I failed their tests.

I trudged back to Dr. Downey's office to tell him and Ginny what Crystal said.

I told them that since I was in the Sex Clinic for my prostate trouble anyhow, I had volunteered to become a male sexual surrogate. Yes, I volunteered to teach frustrated women how to achieve heights of lustful passion, sexual ecstasy, and orgasmic satisfaction.

“Selfless volunteering seems the Christian thing to do,” I said. “But, Crystal turned me down. She said my prostate cancer knocks me out of the running as a sexual surrogate”.

Dr. Downey knows me too well; he laughed at me.

But Ginny, God bless her, said, “It’s ok, John. They just don’t know what they’re missing”.

Dr. Downey set up five more tests with specialists for Ginny.

Thursday, October 25, 2012

A Bird and Two Songs

Yesterday as I transplanted a small tree in the garden, a hawk flew along the fence-line clutching a squirrel in its talons. When squirrels raid one of our birdfeeders, they feed birds.

Two odd songs got stuck in my head all day.

On Pandora Radio Tuesday night as Ginny and I sat reading our library books, in one of my chosen music mixes the computer played Gordon Lightfoot’s haunting ballad *Wreck Of The Edmund Fitzgerald*.

All day long these words have run through my mind:

Is there anyone knows where the love of God goes, When the waves turn the minutes to hours?

And, what’s odder, other music has also played in my brain alternating with *Fitzgerald*. One of the best-known scores in music is the *Hallelujah Chorus* from Handel’s *Messiah*—but that’s not the one anchored in my brain.

In the section immediately before *Hallelujah*, the singer quotes the Patriarch Job singing:

I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that He shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God: Whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another;

That reminds me... I go in for an eye exam today. I may take the weekend off and go fishing.

Wednesday, October 31, 2012

In The Dark

For the past week I’ve spent a lot of time sitting in the dark with my eyes shut.

That’s a new way to see the world.



An unexpected bout of eye surgery which involved injections of radioactive glop necessitated my isolation in the dark. In a way, there's no surprise there because I've been in the dark most of my life.

While sitting with my eyes closed, I've listened to talking books and to news reports about Hurricane Sandy's devastation of New York and the northeast. They say it's the worst storm ever to hit the country.

Of course any hurricane that hits where you live counts as the worst one ever.

God bless the poor yankees.

The best quote I heard on the news came from a reporter watching the Hudson River tunnel flood; he said the Hudson River poured into the tunnel "like a river".

Reminded me of the reporter in New Orleans who said, "Rain is coming down so hard that water is falling right out of the sky".

During my confinement six incomprehensible letters from Social Security Administration, Medicare and insurance companies leave me even more in the dark. Neither Ginny nor I, both literate college graduates, can make heads or tails of these communications. Even when Ginny called the 800-numbers for clarification, we remain in the dark about what our income will be next month.

But, all is well.

We have no more medical appointments scheduled for a few months (we visited doctors' offices five times last week).

As Dr. Downey examined me Monday, he asked Ginny, "Has he any trouble hearing?"

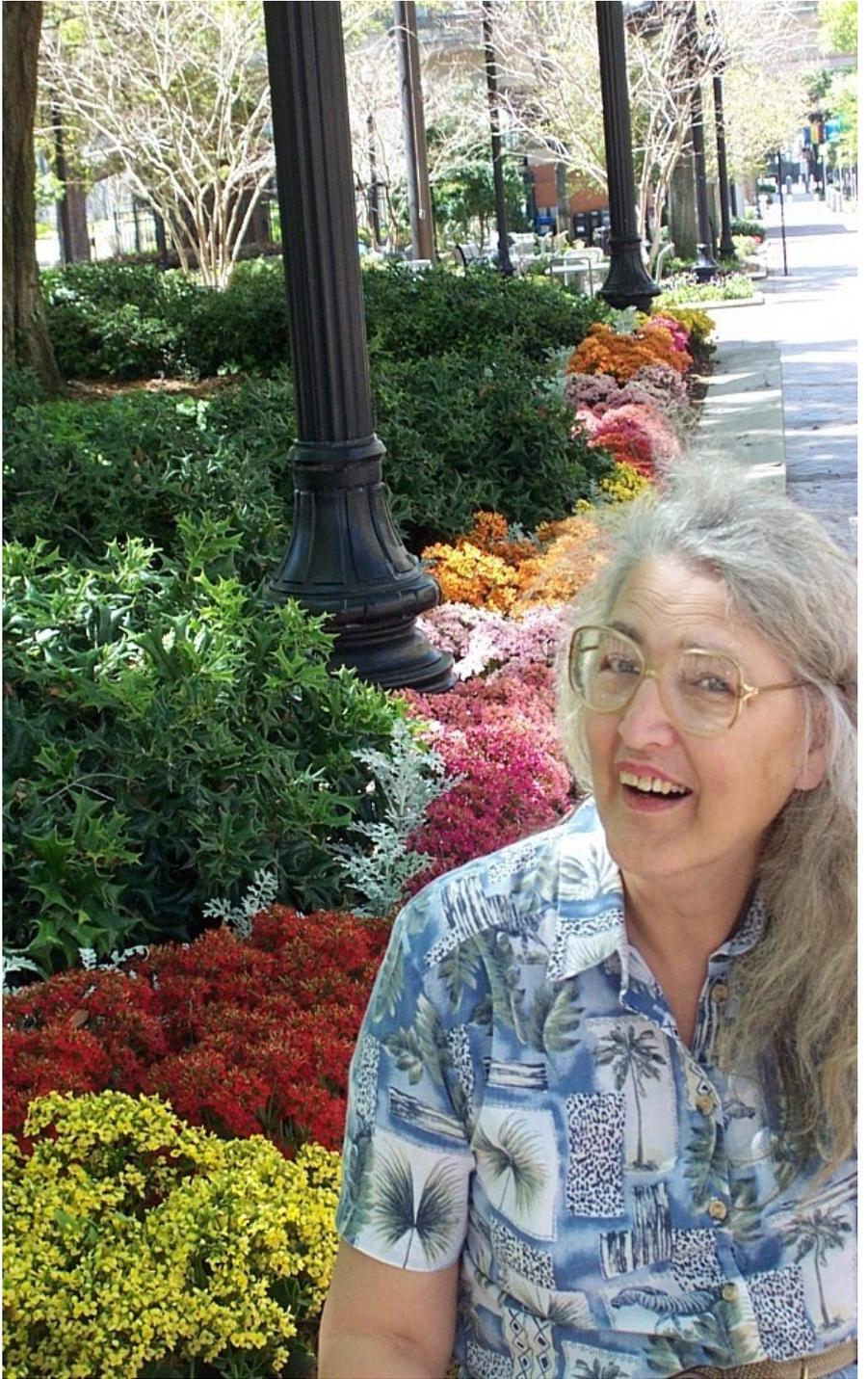
She said, "What?"

I said, "You're asking the wrong person".

He and I started laughing.

As her physician also for 15 years, Dr. Downey knows full well she is mostly deaf and as we laughed, Ginny kept saying, "What? What? What?"

God, I love her so!





Saturday, November 3, 2012
Birds, Moss, Misery, Gort & Gifts

Ginny saves bread crusts in the freezer and when she gets a bagful, we go to Riverside Park to feed ducks and other birds. Big excitement for us.

After another eye operation for me and hours upon hours in various doctors' waiting rooms, we needed a break. So we went to feed the birds.

Odd thing: as my sight dims recently, I see more and more human misery around me this week. All those poor yankees suffering damage from Hurricane Sandy; a six-year-old girl afflicted by a sudden seizure; a feeble old man recovering from radiation therapy with his poor exhausted and exasperated wife trying to care for him; workers frustrated by unemployment; the loving couple arguing in the restaurant and having a hard time making up—I find myself praying for many people whose names I don't even know. But I see them all around me.

At the same time, I see misery, I also see helpers everywhere. Rescuers wading in for storm victims. The waitress being kind to that arguing couple; The babysitter helping the single-parent dad of the child with the seizure; The guy holding open the men's room door for the cripple guy. Yes, misery abounds in this world, but so does good.

My garbled memory sings words from an old hymn:

Once to every man and nation,
 Comes the moment to decide,
 In the strife of truth with falsehood,
 For the good or evil side;...
 By the light of burning martyrs,
 Christ, Thy bleeding feet we track,
 Toiling up new Calv'ries ever,
 With the cross that turns not back;...
 Yet behind the dim unknown,
 Standeth God within the shadows,
 Keeping watch above His own.

A phrase of Scripture comes to mind: And when Jesus saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion. The Scripture also says that In all their afflictions, the Lord was afflicted.

No matter what we have done, no matter what has been done to us, Jesus cares. He stands with us come Hell or high water. (That last phrase is not exactly from Scripture).

I'm sidetracked.



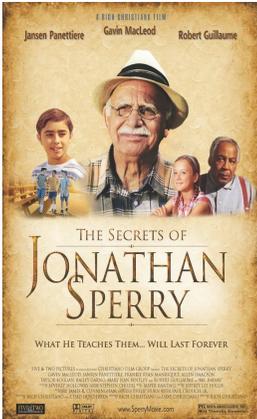
Back to the birds.

So, Ginny and I took a day off to feed the ducks.

Scores of ducks surrounded her as she tossed crusts. Even more pigeons gathered for the feast. And four Ibis joined, approaching her close enough to take crumbs from her hand.

I rested on a park bench admiring Ginny's beauty as she enjoyed this simple pleasure.

We gathered fallen strands of Spanish Moss, an air plant, from the ground and when we got home, she draped silver beards of moss over oak tree branches in our front yard. Slanted sunbeams illuminated the moss and Ginny's silver hair so I could hardly tell one from the other as she balanced on the ladder. She looks beautiful in whatever she does.

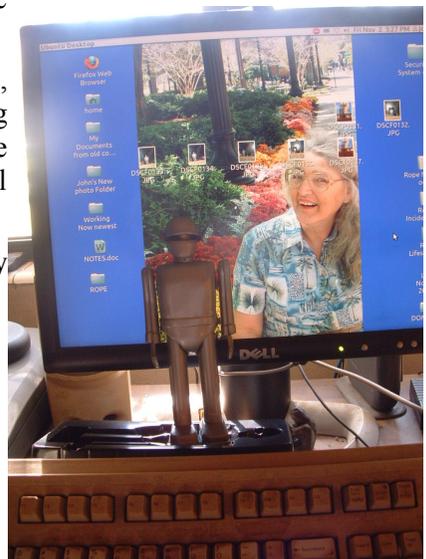


We celebrated Halloween by giving a few kids candy and munching the rest ourselves as we watched two videos. We saw *The Secrets Of Jonathan Sperry*, one of the best films of this sort I've ever seen. In it an old man forms a relationship with the 11-year-old boy who mows his lawn—No, not that sort of relationship; I've been reading the newspaper so much recently that it's infected my thinking—a good relationship. Mr. Sperry's secret proves to be an amazing one.

We also watched *The Day The Earth Stood Still*. I saw this film at the long-gone Palace Theater in 1951 and I still think it's one of the best movies ever made!

After thrilling to this video, nothing would do but for me to dig out my statue of Gort out of storage where it has long lay in its original box.

Here's a photo of it by my computer:





Now here's an odd thing: I know that one of my children gave me this stature of Gort for some Christmas several years ago. It is one of my treasures. Gort winds up and walks; his visor moves. He exudes menace. I remember just where I stored him to keep him safe—but I can't remember which one of my grown children gave Gort to me.

I enjoy the gift; I've forgotten the giver.

I do that a lot. I enjoy love, beauty, birds, moss, sunbeams, seeing hurting people helped—I enjoy the gifts, but I hardly ever give the Giver of all good things a thought.

Sunday, November 4, 2012

Glad We Missed Him

Just minutes after Ginny and I left the bank yesterday morning... Well, TV-4's report says it best:

Police search for Wells Fargo bank robber: Surveillance cameras capture suspect

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. - Police said a man robbed a Lakeshore bank Saturday morning after saying he had a gun and demanding money.

Investigators say a man wearing a blacked hooded sweatshirt, jeans and a Boston Red Sox baseball cap told the teller at the Wells Fargo branch at 4206 San Juan Avenue, he had a gun and asked for money.

Witnesses said he then ran away from the bank.

Police describe the man as a white male, between 5'7"-5'10", thin build, dark hair, and had a mustache.

Here is his photo on surveillance video:





Monday, November 5, 2012
Happy Times (with a tiny bit of confusion)



Donald & Helen

Yesterday to celebrate their wedding anniversary, Donald and Helen invited Ginny and me to a lavish breakfast at their home.

Helen cooked eggs and ham, served with dates, pineapple, and fried apple wedges. She sautéed red and green peppers and onions in a tasty mix.

Delicious!

As we enjoyed the feast, Helen announced that her skill as an artist has earned her a substantial grant from the Jacksonville Community Foundation. And also a commission to create public art for an major area hospital.

Hoot!

Way to go Helen!

Here are two recent example of her art: one of glass, and the other a sketch of a naked girl:



More of Helen's art can be seen at <http://elemental.name/>



I only have one question: Why doesn't she ever introduce me to any of her naked art models?

I'm your father-in-law, Helen; you can trust me.

After breakfast, we lounged talking in their backyard.

Our conversation ranged from the business protocols of biotech companies to the sinking of the replica of *HMS Bounty* in Hurricane Sandy.

Then our conversation turned to our questions about God's control of the universe and of our individual lives.

Did the Lord create the world, flick His finger to set the whole thing spinning and sit back to watch? Does He control just big things like the orbits of planets and presidential elections? Or does He care about the most minute things, like my decisions—what kind of car I buy, who I marry, what job I work??

The Scripture proclaims “The earth is the Lords and the fullness thereof”.

It says, “The Lord God omnipotent reigneth”.

It teaches, “The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: He turneth it whithersoever He will”.

And when it comes to our decisions King Solomon said, “The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord”.

And Jesus said that No sparrow shall fall on the ground without your Father.

Big things. Little things.

But then, if God is in control, what am I responsible for? What do I control?

In theory, I'm inclined to side with the falling sparrow school of thought. Unfortunately, often I do not feel like one of God's cherished little sparrows. I feel more like a clay pigeon on God's skeet range.

Faith tells me He knows what He's doing—but I have my doubts.

When Ginny and I drove home, she replaced batteries and changed the time setting on most of our clocks to account for Daylight Savings Time—she changed all the clocks but one.

The clock radio in the kitchen, she did not change.

That clock has sit on the same shelf for about 15 years and yesterday Ginny told me that she never resets the time on it because years ago the



reset button got broken. So she leaves that clock alone. I did not know that.

Now, understand that this is a digital clock with big green lighted numerals. With my vision problems, it is the one clock I can see best. It is the clock I use to know when to perk coffee in the morning. It is the clock I check when I have a doctor's appointment or a meeting with someone.

When Ginny went out to work, this is the clock I used to know when to expect her home. And when she was late arriving, I worried everyday that she'd been in a traffic accident, or that she and James Bond had met for a passionate affair in some hotel room, or that the car had broke down stranding her in the slums, or that she realized she was sick of me and decided to drive back up north to her mother's, or that. a cop would knock at the front door asking me to come to the morgue to identify her body, or that... Well, you get the way my mind works.

So, why didn't she set the clock radio to the correct time like she did all the other clocks?

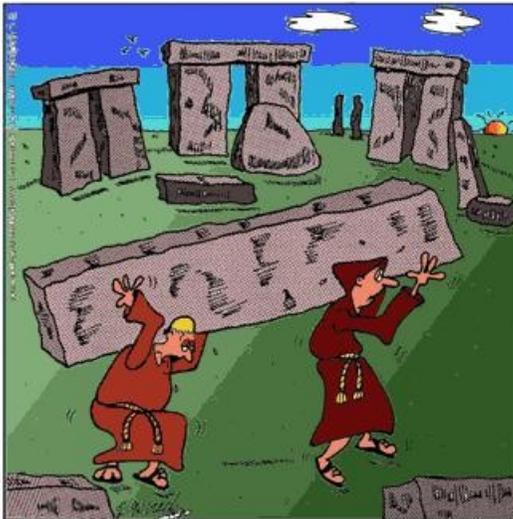
She said she did not need to set that clock yesterday because she had never moved that one's time setting last Spring. That clock has been one hour off for months... And I'd never noticed!

For days and days, weeks and weeks, months and months, for years even, everything I did was an hour off—and I had never noticed!

The standard I'd lived by was wrong.

I'd regulated my life by a clock that did not tell the right time.

And I worried and worried and worried because I never noticed that my standard was far off kilter.



"I hate changing to Daylight Saving Time."

I feel like a dunce.

Is there maybe some spiritual lesson I should notice here?



Thursday, November 8, 2012
The Most Important Election Result!

My most recent book, *Worshday*, opens with a north Florida Cracker farmer cleaning his guns at the kitchen table as he gets ready to ride into town to vote. In those days all voters went to the polls armed. Had to.

And as he cleans the guns, the farmer explains the election to his wife who is cutting up bar soap to do her worshipping. No need for her to go to town with him; women couldn't vote.

Here are my short story's opening words:

Like all real Florida men Leonard Barrs voted for Horace Greeley against That Bastard Grant. Lincoln was bad enough—but Grant! Another term with him in office weren't tolerable.

Then Greeley up and died betwixt Voten Day and the Electoral College meeting! What could you 'spect from a New Yorker?

Now there was nobody to stand against That Bastard Grant.

Leonard Barrs and none of the Florida men around wasn't gonna stand for that. "We want another election with maybe Benjamin Gratz Brown on the Liberal Republican-Democrat ticket. Least he's from Missouri, what is a damn sight better than New York or wherever That Bastard Grant is from." Leonard grumbled.

"Look what That Bastard Grant did at Vicksburg, and Petersburg, and ... well, you know! Another term with him as President—that just weren't tolerable!"

Ah yes, who could forget that important presidential race? Like most Americans, Ginny and I voted yesterday, then stayed up way too late watching election results on tv news.

Someday, when the Kid In The Attic gets born (he's the far-future teenager I write my diary for), he may read of the 2012 election in his high school history book—or maybe the election so important to us today will rank right up there with the Grant/Brown race in significance; his book won't mention it.

To me the single most important election result is that now the voting is over, Robo-caller, automated telephone machines with recorded political messages, will stop calling my home eight to 12 times a day all day every day urging me to vote for Grant or Greeley or Brown or whoever!



November 10/2012

Ginny III

Last night Ginny suffered some kind of attack and passed out.

I called Rescue and rode in ambulance # 5 with her to the hospital. She was admitted. I'll write more when I know more.

Donald snapped this photo of us in the emergence room:



Monday, November 12, 2012

Crisis and Ordinary Life

Once while war correspondent Edward R. Morrow covered the London blitz he and some other journalists heard a fire engine's siren. They jumped in a car and followed the firemen to a home—where a lady's dinner burned on the kitchen stove.

Morrow said that he felt surprised to realize anew that in the midst of the city being bombed, ordinary happenings still go on. Not all that happens is of great magnitude.

I said that when I knew more about what happened to put Ginny in the hospital, I'd write about it.

I still don't know what's going on.



I hear terms being tossed about about cardiac event vs heart attack—I can't tell the difference. And they've run test after test but tell us of no conclusion yet. She may be released soon or may be there quite a while. I know nothing yet.

But, when I got home last night, the pump on the aquarium has burned out and out poor goldfish swim in murk. I had to get the garbage can to the curb. Laundry piles up. Bathroom faucet drips. Grocery shopping to be done—just because a siren wails doesn't mean ordinary life is put on hold. All my kids are pitching in to help with all such stuff

A crisis comes as an extra bonus in life.

According to the apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus is quoted as saying, “When thou drawest water from the well, I am there; when thou hewest firewood, I am with you”.

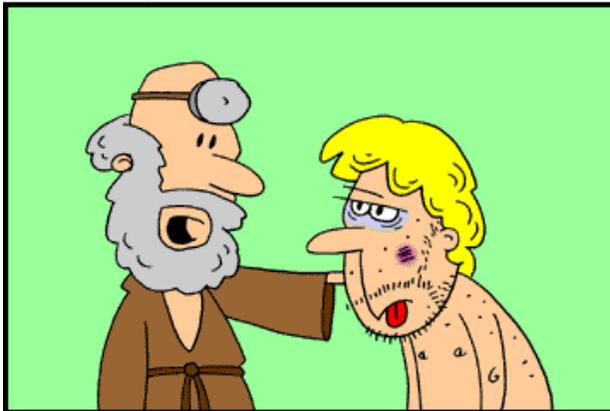
Rings true to me.

Heard this joke at the hospital yesterday--

My father died peacefully in his sleep, not screaming and pounding on the windows like the other people in the car!

I'll write more when I know more.

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Thanks to Charley Abraham

09-07-1999

NEAR AS I CAN TELL YOU'VE BEEN SMITTEN
... BEST THING FOR YOU IS TO REPENT AND
PRAY TWICE AND THEN CALL ME IN THE
MORNING



Tuesday, November 13, 2012
A Medical Decision

Yesterday afternoon a doctor released Ginny from the hospital with a 13-page report explaining that after about eight or ten medical tests, the doctors still don't know what caused her attack.

In summary the report says, "The exact cause of your episode is not certain... Because we do not know the exact cause of your near fainting spell, another spell could occur without warning...If your blood pressure drops too low...your body responds by losing consciousness... this problem is called syncope...a common problem with many possible causes...Dizziness (uncertain cause)...Vertigo (Unknown cause)...near-fainting (uncertain cause)...If heart trouble causes syncope...Heart trouble can be serious and may even be fatal...Certain medications, heart disease, or an inherited condition can also cause this...If heart trouble caused your fainting, treatment may improve blood flow, stop syncope, and help prevent further heart problems..."

She is to see more doctors for more tests as an outpatient, but at the moment she is back home tending her goldfish and watering her houseplants. She says she feels fine. No pain at all.

As the first of many doctors examined her Thursday, Ginny gave him a notarized copy of her Living Will and explained that she does not wish to be resuscitated. He said that he'd never seen anyone ever do that before.

Her Christian approach to possible death impressed him, I think. She said, "I'm not afraid of dying; it's just another damn nuisance we have to go through".

Several doctors gathered round and got excited about her personal medical record book—because for years Ginny has recorded every blood sugar reading, medication, doctor's visit, test result, medical procedure, shot—everything organized under quick-to-find headings. One doctor asked if she were a nurse; another asked if she were a teacher; and one has asked to xerox some of her blank forms to show other doctors.

Now I want to write about my own weird thoughts about her attack:

Her getting out of bed about 2 a.m. Thursday woke me. My arthritis slowed my struggling out of bed and when I found her unconscious and naked on the floor in the hall several thoughts went through my mind before I decided to call rescue:

First, my prostate cancer said I needed to piss big time and I had to move her unconscious body to get in to the bathroom without stepping on her.



With a quick prayer, I checked her breathing and determined that she did not need CPR.

As I struggled to move her and get her covered with a warm robe, she kept rousing a bit and saying, “I’m ok. No need to call rescue. I feel better” then she’d pass out again still on the cold floor in the hall.

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(See Luke 10:30-36)

09-10-1998

DON'T GET TOO EXCITED FELLA, I'M THE
MEDIocre SAMARITAN ... I ONLY GIVE YOU A
BANDAID AND THEN I'M OFF

My next thought was that it would be a shame if she died before our 44th anniversary coming up this week. I love and adore her and I'd miss her terribly. She is my life and love.

I thought of how we have previously discussed whether to call rescue in such an event (our Plan B). Or whether the best thing called for leaving her lay until she was dead (our Plan A). She promises to do me the same loving service if I collapse at home.

I thought of that line from *Grumpy Old Men* and how, on hearing of an old person dieing of a sudden heart attack, Jack Lemon would exclaim, “Lucky Bastard”. Young people have no idea what that means.

I thought of how Ginny's father died in his sleep without a sound after a full day of working in the garden he loved. What happened to Ginny could be hereditary because of good genes. I thought of what a great day we had had browsing garage sales and dabbling in our garden. There are worse ways to spend your last day on earth. And I thought of how my own parents lingered for months in slow agonizing death with cancer—not a happy ending.

I even thought of the Social Security mess we've been dealing with recently and how we expect a check soon and if Ginny died without endorsing it first, I'd have to send the money back!



I prayed for wisdom to do the best thing for her.

Ginny came to and passed out several times, each time insisting she was fine and didn't need medical attention-- as her eyes rolled up in her head, she turned clammy, ghastly pale and collapsed again.

So, I decided the situation called for a professional opinion and I called rescue following our pre-planned protocol in such a case. Ginny and I took Red Cross and CERT training so we know the procedure for maximizing help—directions to dispatch, doors open, lights on, insurance cards ready, list of medications, etc. Even as I followed the protocols I really questioned if I were doing the right thing. Some medical life-prolonging procedures appear to Ginny and me as torturing sick people and we hope to avoid that situation.

The paramedics worked to stabilize her for a long time before the ambulance left the house. I got to ride along with lights and siren blasting. Even though I have written a book about Jacksonville's Fire-Rescue Division, this was the first time I ever got to ride with lights and siren—Cool!

Hospital triage began treating Ginny's symptoms immediately—the interminable tests came later after admission. But we still do not know what caused her attack or what to do next time.

Once I got her home we spent a lovely evening listening to 1960s music on Pandora Internet Radio, holding hands, cuddling, reading our books, chatting, just enjoying being together.

And, I'm proud to say I engaged in a three-way conference phone call with a doctor's business office, a Medicare councilor and an insurance agent to iron out business details; and I handled this myself to save her a bit of worry and frustration—for me this was the most difficult thing in the whole affair!

That business turned out satisfactory for all concerned.

Yet I worry.

Although my calling rescue may have helped Ginny this time, I certainly hope I have not just set her up for future agony.

But our times are in His hands. Lord, show us where to go from here please.



Another thrill-packed day begins for ActionSloth

Friday, November 16, 2012

A Ninja On Wheels

Now that Ginny is back home from the hospital, we adjust our lifestyle into a calmer mode.

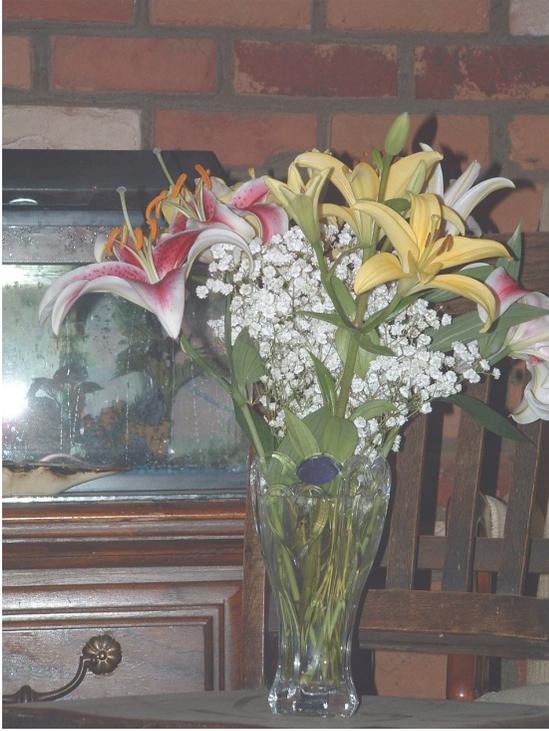
At first an influx of visitors arrived filling our house and expressing care for us. The two nurses in the family relished discussing test results, giving us health tips and showing off nurse parlor tricks—like pinching the back your hand to see if there's blood in your veins.

Until the next doctor's visit, I'm keeping Ginny as inactive as I can but she wants to pitch in doing all the things she did before her “cardiac event”. But I take my own nursing role seriously as I've cooked and cleaned and negotiated business stuff.

Ginny has rested by reading and by spending six hours tracking down a discrepancy in our bank statement—her idea of fun. She found the error and thrilled to know we had more money in the bank than we'd thought—about 70 cents more.



When Gin was a little girl she won a blue ribbon for a prize-winning Iris and she took a class in flower arranging. So I bought her some cut flowers to play with; the photo is her arrangement.



Here's an aside under the heading of The Things I Do For Love!

Back in the early 70s in some California town as we passed through driving the 18-wheeler, Ginny saw a notice about an Iris show. I parked the rig and escorted her to the show—huge crowds of “mature” ladies—very mature—talking about dirt-eating plants.

Across the gymnasium floor, I spotted this wiry guy in a black leather motorcycle jacket, the only other male in the place, and I gravitated to him to explained that I was only in there because my wife wanted to come. He in turn explained to me that he was at the iris show because he'd driven his mother there, then he added a classic line I've remembered all these years.

He said, “I'm a Camellia man myself”.

Then the macho man told me all about growing his camellias.

So much for old memories—back to the present.



The other day I took Ginny to Riverside Park to feed the ducks. When she tossed breadcrumbs in the water, ducks pounced on them from above while scores of little fish nibbled the floating crumbs from below the water. All of a sudden a big white heron swooped down and snatched a fish right at Ginny's feet.

Delighted she said, "This is real nature!"

I wonder where I stand in the food chain?

I see the shadows of herons everywhere.

But I heard a line on the radio that impressed me: "If God owned a refrigerator, your picture would be on the door".

Held in place by the magnets of His love.

And when you feel most lost, you are not abandoned or forgotten, He sees your picture on every milk carton.

An incident while Ginny was still in the hospital dwells on my mind—I had a confrontation with a young man who hassled me as I sat in my wheeled walker seat outside under a tree beside a public street.

We exchanged words.

Three times.

If he had actually touched me, I intended to take off his knee caps. I am too feeble to fight long, but I know how to fight dirty.

If he had not decided to walk away from the confrontation, I like to suspect he might have experienced one of the most memorable mornings of his young life.

Perhaps I'm tough only in my imagination, but it might not be wise to try me.

The Bible speaks of certain elderly people as being "old and full of days"—but that's not all we're full of. Over a long life, a man's capacity to meekly put up with crap fills to near critical mass. We can't take a whole lot more senseless hassle.

Besides that I like to think of myself as a ninja on wheels.

I could qualify for the coveted black shoelace in wheely combat.

As my elderly Aunt Hazel, God rest her, often told me, "Youth and skill can never match old age and treachery".

Right!

We old folks may not be as defenseless as we look. Beware of dirty old men on wheels!



Saturday, November 17, 2012
The Creature In Jacksonville

In the early 1950s all kids in my hometown thrilled because a film crew was shooting a major movie right here using familiar locations such as the Lobster House, a fine restaurant where I could never afford to eat though I often walked past it as I crossed the bridge, and the very spot on Hechshire Drive where my father and I used to go shrimping.

As I recall when the movie was released here, and, as a promotion, the film company gave away free posters depicting *The Creature From The Black Lagoon*; now those posters go on auction starting with a \$7,000 bid.

About 50 years later, Ginny and I vacationed at Wakulla Springs, the first-magnitude spring near Tallahassee where the underwater portions of the movie were filmed. Ginny snapped a photo of me beside The Creature in the lounge at Wakulla Lodge.

I'm the one on the right:





What brought all this to mind was an article in the London newspaper about an auction of old movie posters to be held. The posters at the sale all feature maidens being carried off by monsters.

As a kid when I first saw the Creature in a movie theater—the Palace, the Imperial, or the Empress, I forget which one. All lined Forsyth Street



in a row-- when I saw that movie as a kid, I thought the Creature wanted to tear the girl apart and devour her. Only after I'd grown up did I realize that the monster might have other plans for Julia Adams with her pencil-sharpener breasts.

I was a dumb kid.

Anyhow, yesterday seeing the great graphics of movie posters in the London newspaper brought up many happy memories of monsters and maidens.





Monday, November 19, 2012
I Got Wet For A Stupid Bluejay!

At breakfast yesterday Ginny suddenly alerted to something she saw out the window.

In the screen porch of the abandoned house next door, a bluejay fluttered trying to get out. It must have found some opening in the screen to get inside but it could not find where it had come in.

This distressed Ginny. Moved with compassion for the bird, she wanted me to trudge out in the freezing rain, wade through knee-high wet grass, and free the bluejay.

She quoted the Holy Bible's saying that God cares about every sparrow that falls.

I explained to her that while God cares about sparrows, the Bible says nothing about stupid bluejays.

Ginny is no theologian. She insisted that I brave the freezing drizzle, trespass on the abandoned property, and open the door to free the bird.

Her compassion cost me aggravation... as mine so often has made extra work for her: *Come to dinner, my wife won't mind setting an extra place... Sure I can lend you a few dollars...Bake five dozen cookies for Church coffee hour? No problem, Ginny whips up great cookies...*

I find it easy to give away what ain't mine to give.

But—this comes under the heading of The Things I Do For Love—I went over, (getting soaked in the process), pried open the screen door and either set the bluejay free, or maybe let one of the neighborhood cats into the porch.

My action pleased Ginny and that in turn pleased me.

And the incident almost triggered a (faulty) memory:

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

The poet likened that situation to the frustrated, trapped feeling of so many people. People who could identify with how that bird was feeling

Her trapped sparrow tried frantically to escape by flying here and there, crashing into the wire mesh, feeling scared and trapped and frustrated and thwarted by its circumstance—yet, the poet said, the



screen door stood open all the time. In its panic the bird just could not see any way out.

The door to freedom always stands open.

Jesus once said, "I am the door".

His door always stands open to us.

The question is, Is our door open to Him?

Tuesday, November 20, 2012

Ginny's Health Update

We spent Monday morning with Dr. Downey who said she had a vasovagal episode. He advised us to look it up on the Internet; the Mayo Clinic website has an article saying the term means she fainted.

Dr. Downey went over the test results from the hospital (the ones he had—the hospital had not sent them all, nor had they sent her patient treatment summary, nor her patient release code--so never get sick on a holiday weekend) and He said all the test results, even the heart murmur, fall within acceptable normal range for a woman her age.

Of course one of the test results identifies her as an African-American Female (don't go into the hosp[ital on a holiday weekend).

Dr. Downey issued no new prescriptions and told her just to come in for her next regularly scheduled appointment next year.

I asked if are any restrictions on her normal activities and he said she ought not to go swimming alone or take up sky diving. Other than that he said her weakness is caused by smoking and he advised her to stop.

Just in case, he gave her the option of seeing five other doctors and he will mail referrals, so she may have appointments with a cardiologist, a pulmonary specialist, an event monitor, a neurologist, and a gynecologist in the future--if she chooses to go to any or all of the above. It's her choice.

Bottom line: neither he nor any of the physicians at the hospital know what caused her problem although they ruled out many possible reasons.

Dr. Downey said her main problem is smoking and she should give it up. I think she ought to give up doctors!





John Cowart's 2013 Diary

Thursday, November 22, 2012
Butterball Police Attack



Help!

The Butterball Police Swat Team surrounds my house.

They want their turkey back.

They'll never take him alive!

I've already cooked him.



Happy Thanksgiving

Sunday, November 25, 2012
Thank You Book Buyers

Many thanks to the discerning readers who bought copies of my books on Black Friday.



Wednesday, November 28, 2012
Pennies From Heaven ... Or Someplace???



Several times in his novel about John F. Kennedy's assassination, a book with the odd title *11/22/63*, Stephen King uses the phrase, "Life turns on a dime". The phrase reveals how actions have consequences—sometimes unexpected consequences; it shows we have no idea what the future holds even seconds from now.

Over this past month Ginny and I have found our life turns not on a dime but on pennies.

A bunch of pennies.

And I have no idea why.



Is it God? Or is it natural circumstance?

And, is there a difference?

Here's a little bit of what happened to us:

For months we had regressed from poverty to abject poverty. Our situation looked desperate. After Ginny retired, the bottom fell out. We found ourselves without the minimal resources we had expected.

To keep body and soul together, I stood in line at three different church food pantries (God bless those folks for their aid). When the electric company threatened to cut off our lights, we appealed to a charity agency to pay our light bill (God bless them too) We applied for food stamps—and were denied. Bill collectors called daily. With great reluctance, I overcame my vanity and asked our grown children for money.

Of course each kid cheerfully helped us with cash, groceries and other help as they were able.

Things began to turn around for us.

In varying amounts, penny by penny, out of nowhere, money began to come in.

The car dealer called telling us he owed us a refund on mechanical work we'd had done six months ago. A drug company sent me a check for \$3.90 because I'd overpaid them. Social Security adjusted our income and payment dates with a six page incomprehensible letter explaining why—Albert Einstein cringed when he got such letters. Someone out of the past who Ginny used to work with sent a surprise gift card. My book sales generated more royalties than I expected. I was able to fax the bank a receipt proving we'd already paid a bill they were still trying to collect—What a relief! I won \$5 on a scratch-off ticket. And the telephone company refunded me cash for downtime last summer!

It all added up.

Jennifer and Terri even gave us a tv set and we enjoyed watching the parades and football on Thanksgiving Day.

As best I can figure pennies and dollars poured in to us from six or eight different sources,

Or was it all from One Source?

Anyhow, today Ginny and I have gas in the car, food in the frig, money in the bank, and, most importantly, pipe tobacco in my humidor. My belly is full. Bills are paid. Our home is warm. Our health is tolerable. And future prospects look good.



God's in His Heaven and ... and I'm still down here.

Yes, Ginny says that were I to win Lotto, I'd treat it as a problem!

Our life has turned on a dime and I question why?

We are doing nothing different. We work no harder. We pray no differently. We give no differently. We live just as we did when facing abject poverty. So what happened?

Did God intervene on our behalf?

If so, He took His own sweet time about it!

Did our present well-being come about as a natural consequence of life and business? Is our abundance of pennies just a normal result of businesses settling their year-end accounts?

Was God miffed at us before, but got over His peeve?

Does physical prosperity have anything to do with spiritual standing?

Some preachers say so.

I think they lie.

When they tell me that material things equal God's approval, I suspect what they are really saying is, "I got mine 'cause I'm godly. Tough about you".

In fact, when I hear testimonies about how God prospered some guy, I resent him. I question what's wrong with me that God does not give me goodies.

And it is an easy step for me to go from asking, "What's wrong with me" to asking "What's wrong with God".

To me equating material well-being with holiness reeks of vanity. The love of money, the chasing after material things, is a root of all sorts of evil.

Writing to some of the poorest slaves in Nero's empire, St. Peter assured them that no matter how poor we are, we have what is truly needed. He said, "Jesus our Lord according to His divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain to life and godliness through the knowledge of Him that hath called us to glory and virtue".

All things pertaining to life and godliness.

John The Baptist told the soldiers, "Be content with your pay".

Content.



King Solomon said that the blessing of the Lord maketh rich and all thy labor adds nothing to it.

Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor".

Case in point: St Paul knew how to deal with prosperity and how to suffer.

He said, "I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content

"I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me"

These things puzzle me.

I do not understand the ways of God, nor the workings of the world.

I feel like I'm a human turtle and as Ralph Emerson said, "All the thoughts of a turtle are turtle".

That does not stop me from writing and telling the world my own two cents worth.



Thursday, November 29, 2012
Stuck In Sticky Mud

Bob, a reader of my website, e-mailed asking: "[Are you able to help me in some research and explain KJV Judges 5:20](#)"?

I had to look up the verse; it says, "They fought from heaven; the stars in their courses fought against Sisera".

I assume Bob wants to understand what it means to say that stars fought.

I took a stab at it for him with this answer:

Hi Bob,

What a fun question! I'm glad you visited my website and I've enjoyed thinking about how to answer you. Your question sparked some happy



memories for me because once years ago, when she was a pre-teen, my daughter Eve and I constructed a model of Sisera's war chariot for a Sunday School project.

Please understand that I am not a Bible scholar, just an amateur and occasional Bible reader. You may do much better consulting authoritative Bible commentaries. But here is my take on the passage.

The first thing to note is that Judges 4 & 5 contain a narrative section and a poem, both describing a battle between the Canaanites and the Israelites .

The verse you question, 5:20, are lines from a song, “Then sang Deborah...” (5:1)

One feature of Hebrew poetry is parallel repetition; that is, it says a thing once, then repeats the same thing in slightly different words:

I, even I, will sing unto the LORD;
I will sing praise to the LORD (5:3)

I, Deborah arose,
I arose a mother in Israel. (5:7)

They fought from heaven;
The stars in their courses fought against Sisera.
The river of Kishon swept them away,
That ancient river, the river Kishon. (5:20,21)

The poetical structure is one factor to consider in thinking about this passage.

Another factor is to compare the poem with the narrative account in Chapter 4.

The pagan general Sisera boasted of 900 armor-plated chariots (4:13). Some ancient source, Josephus I believe, said two horses carried a crew of three warriors in each chariot—a driver, an archer and a spearman. I imagine these battle tanks must have weighted close to two tons.

On level ground these battle tanks cut through lines of enemy foot soldiers with lethal effect. On uneven ground... Well, the floor of the chariot was not solid; a tightly stretched carpet floored the fighting platform and these carpets acted in much the same way as a car's springs act to give a level ride.

Invincible?

Not necessarily.



God told Deborah, the only female Judge, “Go and draw toward Mount Tabor... and I will draw (Sisera) unto thee to the river Kishon Sisera with his chariots” (4:6).

Ok, the Israelites camped up on the mountain side of Tabor, Sisera's charioteers camped on the level plain near the riverbank.

On the day of battle, as Deborah sang, “The heavens dropped, the clouds also dropped water”.

Water on the plain means mud.

Josephus, I think, said that during the night Deborah's army crept down into the clear space in front of the mountain and dug trenches. Rain water and the overflowing river water filled the trenches; when the chariots attacked, they thought they were charging over level ground.

They bogged down in the mud.

“The Lord discomfited Sisera and all his chariots, and all his host with the edge of the sword” (4:15).

“Then were the horsehoof broken by means of the pransings, The pransings of their mighty ones” (5:22)

I have no idea what pransings are. Ditches? Sticky mud?

Anyhow, Israelite foot soldiers slaughtered the Canaanites.

So, they fought from Heaven,
The stars in their courses fought against Sisera (5:20)

I doubt this verse says anything related to astrology. As Shakespeare observed, “The fault is not in our stars but in ourselves that we are underlings”.

I think the bottom line is that God rained on their parade.

The heathen relied on their superior weapons systems instead of the Living God; God thwarted their superior technology with mud.

He used the very thing the Canaanites were proudest of to bring them defeat.

Or you could say, Wet weather favored the Jews against the Canaanites.

General Sisera escaped on foot, entered a Bedouin tent, fell asleep exhausted, and the lady there nailed his head to the ground with a tent peg—don't think in terms of a Boy Scout tent's pegs, but a thick, three-foot long stake used to anchor Bedouin tents in a desert sand storm.



In one of the most poignant passages of Scripture Sisera's mother speaks for women everywhere in every age—any woman with a son, father, husband, lover in the armed forces—as she worries, When will he come home? Will he come home?

Anyhow, Bob, these are my thoughts on your question. I hope this helps.

Friday, November 30, 2012

Busy, Busy, Busy

Already our calendar fills with Christmas season activities—items for our pleasure, duty, and necessity.

Pesky doctors call for new appointments.

Happy family activities hover soon.

Old friends call with invitations.

The Scripture says, As is thy day, so shall thy strength be.

Yesterday Ginny and I saw to property taxes and grocery shopping. Today we plan to relax at home and plan where to go when. Tomorrow we intend, God willing, to go Christmas shopping. 'Tis the season to exercise restraint, common sense, and patience.... Fat chance!

Saturday, December 1, 2012

Late Mail

Wonder why my mail was delivered late yesterday by a substitute mailman?

An office pool of workers at the Kings Road Post Office bought 85 tickets in the Powerball lottery drawing for Thursday night.

One of those 85 quick-pick tickets won one million dollars.

Had they hit one more of the numbers the total jackpot would have been \$587.5 million.

An inscription above the entrance of U.S. Post Office building in New York quotes what Herodotus had to say about the ancient Persian Empire's pony express riders system for getting messages from the Mediterranean coast to India in three days.

“Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds”.

This unofficial Post Office motto says nothing about winning Powerball.



Good for the Jacksonville Post Office guys and gals! I'm happy for them.

Who can blame them if they celebrated a bit?

Soon, these workers can expect a visit from Santa Clause. ... and the tax collector.

Sunday, December 2, 2012
They Moved The Store

Yesterday I wanted to buy a double-barreled shotgun.

Wood stock with steel barrels and pump action. A realistic toy shotgun that fires caps with a bang.

Wanted to get it for a neighbor kid. Knew just the place to buy one. I'd seen such shotguns in that store before.

So, Ginny and I ventured across the bridge and braved heavy, insane, holiday shopper traffic to search for parking near one of Jacksonville's biggest shopping malls. We arrived at the location and found ... no toy store there.

What happened?

It used to be right here.

A toy store with a booming business every Christmas season. We'd shopped there many times buying toys for our own kids back when they were little...

Er, Come to think of it, the last time we shopped in that toy store was 30 years ago.

No wonder it was not where we remembered it.

They moved the store.

The world moved on.

I wish it would stay put!

I wish things would stay as I remember them—or maybe not.

This incident reminded me of something that happened back in the late 1960s, the first time I took Ginny Christmas shopping.

Here's the way I remember it when I wrote about it years later:



Warnings and Illicit Kissing On Christmas Eve



Caution: this posting contains -- among other things -- a warning about illicit kissing.

What would a nice, 43-years-married, old guy like me know about illicit kissing?

Well, let me tell you:

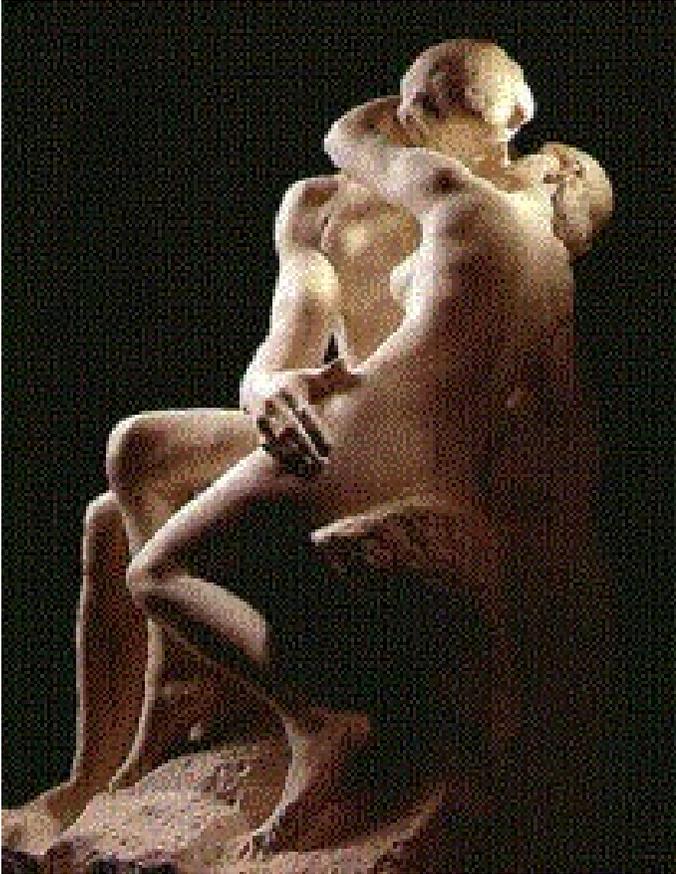
When Ginny and I were first engaged, I drove a brand new 1967, four-on-the floor (I don't think they even had automatic transmissions back then), Mustang. Bright yellow, the yellow you only see nowadays edging the cover of a *National Geographic* magazine.

Wow! A sporty new car and a beautiful woman.

Wasn't I something!

On Christmas Eve, Ginny wanted a few last minute things from the mall and I was proud to drive her in spite of the heavy traffic.

To turn left off the main highway into the mall, we got stuck in a monster long line of plain drab old cars which inched up a steep hill to trickle through the light one or two at a time.



**Ginny's first Christmas gift to me:
A reproduction of Rodin's Kiss**

We were obviously going to be stuck in traffic on that hill for a while and since even back then I was a biblically minded man, I decided to "redeem the time".

So... whenever the line of traffic stopped, I reached for Ginny, or she reached for me, and we smooched fervently.

HONK! Honk, honk!

What's this?

The guy behind me kept hitting his horn, the creep.

What's the matter with him? Traffic isn't going anywhere.

We started kissing again.

Again, he started honking.



The spoilsport. Let him find his own girl. What business is it of his what I do in the privacy of my own new yellow four-on-the floor Mustang.

The light changed. I crept forward in the line maybe three car lengths and stopped again.

Again I kissed; again he honked. He not only honked, he also flashed his lights at me!

Now, I'm getting mad. This guy is a pest, a creep, a voyeur, a busybody. I'm half a mind to...

The traffic light changed again. I inched up the hill toward the turnoff again and stopped on red to resume smooching.

The dirty so-and-so really leaned on his horn this time.

I ignored the killjoy and kept on kissing Ginny until.....

CRUNCH!

Here, younger readers should know that a car with a manual transmission requires that the driver keep one foot on the brake and the other on the clutch when stopped on a hill in traffic. If you don't do that, then your car rolls backward.

That's what I had done!

Yes, every time, I'd lean over to kiss Ginny, I had let up on both clutch and brake until I rolled backward and smacked into the driver behind, who had done everything in his power to warn me of the danger.

I did not feel quiet so sporty when I had to get out of the car and apologize to him. I felt stupid and silly ...and I discovered that I'd crumpled my own rear end (You can take that figuratively and literally.).

Now let me say straight out that as a fundamentalist Christian I have nothing against engaged couples kissing. I wish them joy.

However, I'd be a dunce if I did not learn from my own experience that when God warns me about something He's not being a spoilsport, a killjoy or a busybody meddling in affairs which are no concern of His.

If the scripture teaches nothing else, it teaches that God hates to see His children get hurt.

So He warns us.

He warns us again and again.





He blows the horn and blinks the lights when we do certain things because He can see that by doing them we are going to crumple our own rear ends.

But most of us do just like I did with that other driver, we ignore the danger signs or get peeved at the person doing the warning.

As sure as cars roll downhill when the driver is not keeping his foot on the brake, there are other rules in the universe. The rules are not arbitrary but they are absolute.

Take an easy one for instance, the Bible again and again warns us that we ought to care for the poor.

"He that hath pity on the poor lendeth to the Lord," says the Proverb (19:17).

Jesus equates our care of the poor to our own eternal destiny (Matthew 24).

Yet, the Bible also reveals a flip side to concern for the poor.

In Leviticus 19:15, the Lord declares, "Ye shall do no unrighteousness in judgment: thou shalt not respect the person of the poor, nor honor the person of the mighty: but in righteousness shalt thou judge thy neighbor."

In other words, right is right and wrong is wrong regardless of the status of the person acting. Stealing the pennies from a blind beggar's cup is stealing -- and charging a few personal bucks on Donald Trump's credit card is also stealing.

And God's word warns us not to steal. Stealing makes us thieves and God hates to see that happen to one of His beloved ones. And that's just what you and I are, beloved ones of God.

As a fundamentalist Christian, I believe that Christ warned and warned us away from the sins that bring us down, defeat us and corrupt us.



Then He died to save us from the sin that has us beat. He died the death for us and rose again from that death to lift us up to where He is.

Wow! What can we say after all that?

Unfortunately, most of us don't say much. We're too proud to say thank you to God or to even repeat the warnings even those we care about most.



I suspect most other people do just like I did when they ignore the warnings and back into trouble: I fussed and fumed and blamed and then ended up driving around with my own rear end crumpled.

Nobody should live like that.

St. Paul was not speaking tongue in cheek when he linked two rules for living in I Thessalonians 5:14; he told Christians to "warn the unruly" in one breath and in the next he commanded, "Comfort the feebleminded."

That's fundamental.

Thursday, December 6, 2012
The Jesus Christ Barbecue

Tuesday Ginny and I drove up to Kingsland, Georgia. And on the way home I glimpsed a highway billboard advertising the Jesus Christ Barbecue.

Of course no such place exists, but I saw a sign to it anyhow.

Thing is, in all the frenzy of getting ready to get ready for Christmas—you know, all the preliminary stuff you have to do before even decorating your tree—I've hardly given Jesus a thought recently.

Yes, I know Christmas marks an observance of God entering this world to save mankind. But Santa stuff pre-empts God for me and, I imagine, for many other people.

I mean, what is God's honor and majesty, or man's eternal salvation and deliverance from a burning Hell compared to a sale on gift sets of aftershave?

My family escaped some of the Santa frenzy as they grew up. When my kids were little, Ginny and I told them that Santa was a lovely old legend, a myth that we all pretend to believe even though it is not real but it is so much fun to pretend that it is, that we do.

Therefore the kids never "believed" in Santa, although we always went all out to decorate, celebrate, feast, and give gifts.

So, Tuesday found Ginny and me gleaning the Salvation Army Thrift Store in Georgia to load our car with fun gifts to the best of our ability and purse.

The Lord Jesus Christ stayed out from underfoot during all this Christmas falderol .

Jesus is smarter than I am.



Ginny and I shopped, listened to carols, shopped, dined out, shopped, looked at decorations, and shopped—all with Jesus, Whose birth we celebrate, far in the background.

Then as we drove home I saw the big yellow and red billboard sign: JESUS CHRIST'S BARBECUE

That is not what it said. But those words are what I saw as we sped past on the highway.

It was a question of kerning.

Kerning has to do with the spacing of printed letters. For instance a printed M is wider than a printed I. Kerning allows for proportional spacing of letters; there's not always the same distance between one alphabet letter and another.

So the billboard really advertised *Jessi* somebody's restaurant up the road, but I saw those first three letters and my mind's allowance for my blindspot filled in the rest.

I have this tiny blindspot in my left eye. It causes no problem driving—my doctor says I am safe to drive during daylight hours—but it factors into my doing small things, like fitting a screwdriver into the slot on a screw or a key into the keyhole, and it blurs the middle out of some highway billboard words. If the kerning is slightly off, then my brain fills in what it guesses should be the rest of the sign.

And I'm sure I saw what I saw even if it's ridiculous.

So *Jessi* became *Jesus* and my brain immediately balked at what my eyes thought the billboard said. I know good and well that there is no Jesus Christ's Barbecue serving succulent ribs, beef and chicken.

Although, some folks do proclaim their faith in naming their secular businesses; I see Heavenly hair dressers and Spirit-Filled lawn care and Praise The Lord book stores and Hallelujah used car lots all over the South. Good for these folks. They say what they can in the best way they know.

You know, sometimes it takes just the littlest thing to turn my thoughts back to Jesus. Yes, He is always in the background even when I concentrate on buying presents. But, out of sight, out of mind.

Guess what?

There's nothing wrong with that.

When a Christian who loves the Lord doesn't think of Christ for a while, all that proves is that we're comfortable with Him. You'd better think of an active enemy all the time. You have to be alert for bad guys.



But a friend needs no such constant attention. You can even go to sleep in God's presence; you dare not do that with an enemy.

The Spirit moves like a breath of wind; we breath Him in and out constantly even when we are no more aware of Him than a fish is of the water it swims in.

But sometimes we do become aware.

God was in the world from the foundation of the earth. Yes as Jesus said, "Before Abraham was, I am".

Yet, the incarnation, God becoming man, is a well-documented historic fact that happened at a specific time in a specific place to specific people.

The world, at least a few people in it, became aware of Emmanuel—God With Us.

But sometimes, I think I'm not the only one to misread signs.

Everybody knows Jesus Christ does not run a roadside barbecue stand—if He runs anything, it's a crab shack.

P.S.: I will not be posting for a couple of days because I go in today to have the eye doctor stick another needle in my eye to keep my macular degeneration from progressing. It's easy to find his office at the Retina Clinic because it's right next door to the Rectal Surgeon's office; I do not ever want to misread those two signs!

Friday, December 7, 2012
An Odd Joy In Christmas Lights

Yesterday's visit to the eye surgeon turned out better than I expected; Dr. Sailor said my sight has improved so that he did not need to inject glop behind my eyeball again, that I'm ok to drive, and that I do not need to see him again for a couple of months.

Thanks be to God and the good doctor.

Dr Sailor and his nurse broke out laughing when I told them about the Jesus Christ Barbecue sign; he said that was the funniest thing a macular degeneration patient had told him in years.

It was about a year ago this week that my eyesight first went phooy as I was driving home from a trip Kingsland a few days before Christmas.

I've wondered why Christ, who healed many blind people while here on earth, would let me suffer this vision impairment?



Doesn't Jesus love me anymore?

Sure He does. He said it's better to enter into His Kingdom with one eye than to be cast into Hell with both eyes wide open.

So, why me? Why now?

My being old as dirt might have something to do with it.

But there's another factor: with my own vision dimming, I see more of other people's problems to pray about.

For instance in the eye clinic yesterday I noticed three people I would never have encountered had I not been there myself. There was an old man wearing a Korean War veteran's cap. He wore his best suit, white shirt, tie, polished shoes—the way people of my youth used to dress up to go to the doctor's. I go in jeans now, but I remember when I'd wear a suit for a doctor's visit.

This old veteran's sight was so bad that his daughter had to lead him through the office by the hand.

Poor bastard. I sent up a flash prayer to Christ for this old guy's comfort. I would never have encountered him had I not been seeking treatment myself.

The woman in gray looks far too young to need treatment for macular degeneration. She has a long road ahead of her. *Lord, give her aid.*

The nurse-- first off, I can see well enough to spot her big tits. Then I noticed the worried expression on her face. It occurred to me that she must be having family problems and I prayed for her home life.

Then there was Dr. Sailor himself. I know he is a yachtsman and has a rebellious teen at home. God help him!

Now I seldom pray for such people I chance to encounter long or hard, rarely do they remain long in my heart. But they are there for a little while. And for a moment I do care about them big tits, VA cap, and all.

They would not have crossed my path were I not in the same boat (yes, I know I'm mixing metaphors, but that says it best).

The thing is, I wonder if Jesus did not gift me with this eye problem just to bring me into contact with people to care about that I would not otherwise have encountered.

Makes me wonder.

Normally I only flash a prayer to the Lord for people I notice. Noticing someone often constitutes a call to pray for them. Occasionally I even smile at them, or hold a door open or some such small courtesy. Rarely



do I speak. But it's not too unusual for me to listen to their tale if they want to talk—like the clerk in the hardware store Wednesday who just came back to work that day after a heart attack in August and drew me into a corner to tell me about it while Ginny shopped. I told him that I was glad his health was improving but that a heart attack might be a good indication he should prepare for Eternity.

My point is that noticing people and exercising even a tiny bit of mini-love just might let them know that for a short moment somebody gives a damn about them. And acts of mini-love may spark their interest in the Great Love available.

Or, maybe I just do this goody-goody stuff just to feel like I'm a neat guy. Who knows? All my motives are mixed motives. I'd go ape trying to sort them out. But on some low level, I have a chance to show love. Or maybe I've just been listening to too much saccharine Christmas music on the radio.

Anyhow, after the good news about my own sight's improvement, Ginny and I enjoyed breakfast at a sandwich shop near the hospital. Three physicians sat at a nearby table commensurating with each other about their work load.

I eavesdropped.

One complained that it had been such a busy night in the emergency room that he was 12 hours late getting home.

Another doctor, an ossiologist (is that the right word, I mean a guy who sets broken bones)...the bone doctor said Christmas is his busiest season.

“Thank Heaven,” he said, “For strings of Christmas lights and idiots on ladders. They're paying my kid's way through college”.

Sunday, December 9, 2012

No Blue Max For Me

Because the restaurant where Ginny and I'd been invited for a surprise party tends to be upscale and expensive, I pulled up the menu on-line ahead of time to see what I would be able to eat according to my ability and budget.

Because I'm such a sloppy eater and so self conscious, I avoid eating in public, especially among strangers. I worry that my eating might disgust anyone seeing me. Usually I just drink coffee at such functions and hope no one will notice.



As though anyone on earth would give a damn what, or even if, I eat. The world dwells on concerns other than my dignity.

However, this surprise party was to honor someone important to me—several someones actually. Five members of the family have birthdays between now and January.

So I steeled myself to go the party and I studied the menu ahead of time.

I chose a special meal called The Blue Max.

The menu description made it sound palatable.

Besides, I once knew Jack D. Hunter (God rest him), the author of the famous World War I aviation novel titled *The Blue Max*.

During the 1980s, Jack, author of 17 novels—several made into movies-- served as writing coach at the *Florida Times-Union*, Jacksonville's daily newspaper, where I worked as a mail clerk. As fellow Christians, we struck up a friendship and he encouraged me greatly in my writing.

Naturally, when I saw Blue Max on the menu—named for Jack's book or because it's cooked with blue cheese?--I decided I would order the Blue Max at the party.

Didn't happen.

Just as I stood up to shave and dress up for the party, the phone rang. Turns out the guest of honor had learned of the surprise party and adamantly refused to attend.

The party was canceled.

Crap!

About 15 people's Saturday night plans torpedoed.

Some cried.

As I hung up the phone on hearing the news, I thought of my mother. She mastered the art of removing joy from any would-be happy occasion.

The more I thought about what had happened, the more it upset me.

I have been to events where I felt uncomfortable, but it did not kill me to stay an hour or two instead of raining on the parade for everybody else.

How annoying!

You know, the best thing when I let someone piss me off—the best thing for for the good of my own soul—is for me to remember times



when I have done the same sort of thing to someone in the past that is being done to me in the present.

My memory is a bitch.

Soon as the thought about what someone did aggravates me, pesky memory happily supplies me with examples of times when I offended. Times I've spoiled someone else's happiness.

It's that whole mote and beam thing again.

Since Ginny is closest to me and knows as much of my heart as can be known, I asked her about times when I've done that very thing to her.

She said we seldom hurt others intentionally. It's usually inadvertent. But we are a selfish lot. "John," she said, "It's just part of the human condition".

I asked her to forgive me for being such an ass.

"Part of the human condition," she said.

The Scripture talks about forbearing and forgiving one another.

Hard to do.

I haven't learned to act Christian yet.

And Lord, I don't want any more lessons in disappointment and frustration. I can't take much more!

Did I just hear a Voice from Heaven saying, "Sure you can, John"?

Anyhow, for dinner, no Blue Max for me at the party.

Just left-over spaghetti at home.

Tuesday, December 11, 2012

Christmas Bones

Nothing says Merry Christmas to me like handling old bones.

Each year Ginny and I try to do something special just for our own pleasure during the Christmas season—watch the boat parade one year, hear Handel's *Messiah* another year, take a horse-drawn carriage around downtown, serve dinner to homeless one Christmas, tour historic churches, ride our bikes through Riverside on a long ago Luminaria Night—any fun thing that strikes our fancy.

Yesterday for our Christmas fun outing we attended an excellent presentation on Florida's Ancient Animals given by Jean Schubert, naturalist supervisor with Jacksonville's Recreation and Community Services Department.



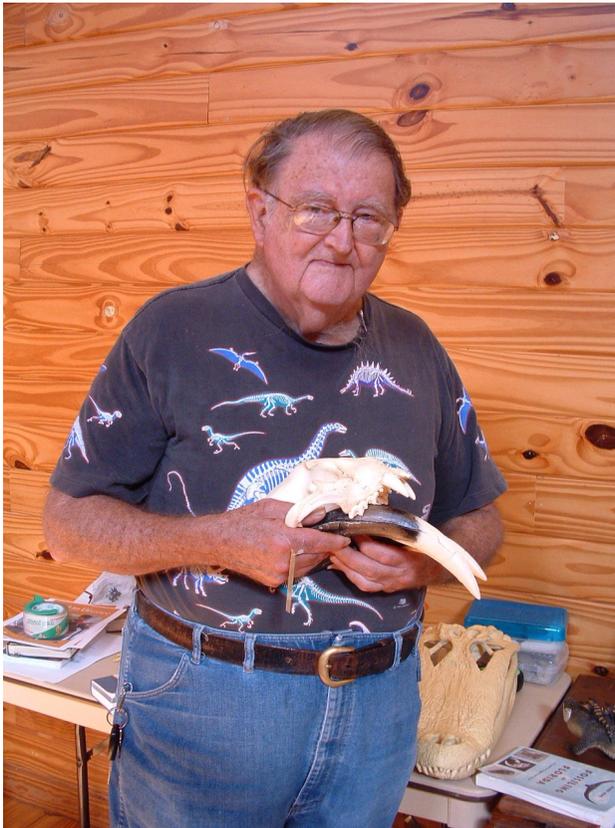
Ms Schubert illustrated her talks with hand puppets, photographs, books, and fossils (both authentic and museum quality replicas). She also used two steel measuring tapes to give us a feel for the size of the ancient creatures that once roamed Florida.

For instance, she showed a nine-inch model of a modern scorpion, then had a child in the audience measure off the nine-foot length of ancient scorpion fossils found in Florida. Our state also served as home to dragonflies with a three-foot wingspread.

She demonstrated the difference between mastodon teeth and woolly mammoth teeth. I confused the two beforehand but I know better now. She taught me that mammoths grazed; mastodons browsed, and their teeth show the difference.

She showed us a wolf skull and told how giant red wolves, sloths, bison, and beaver once inhabited our area.

Here's a photo of me holding the skull of a modern jaguar to compare the teeth with those of Florida's ancient saber-toothed tiger:





And, here I am with an alligator skull; in the good ol' days this one's ancestor grew 40+ feet long.

For obvious reasons I envy the big cat and gator their teeth! Dentist pulled the last of mine in June.

Also, notice in both photos I am wearing my dinosaur shirt—a shirt old enough to qualify me as a fossil—it dates back to the late '60s or early 70's. And, it glows in the dark!

No dinosaurs lived in Florida; our state rose from the ocean bottom too late for them. But I thought it appropriate to wear my shirt to this fun event anyhow.



The children attending the program seemed fascinated with visions of finding fossils themselves in the spill of the phosphate mine in this photograph:

Ms Schubert's steel tape showed the kids, who held one end of the tape, how long and tall and big Florida's ancient animals were.



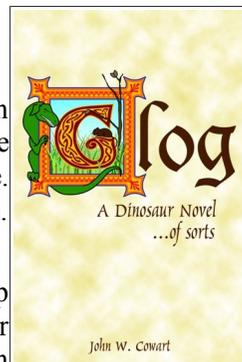
To give some idea of the scale of a mastodon, here is a photo I took a couple of years ago of Ginny with one at Florida's State Museum in Tallahassee:



Although the common geologists' time-table was followed in yesterday's program, the focus was on what lived here more than on when they lived. As a creationist, I appreciated that element in the lecture.

My own views on dinosaur life were presented in my book *Glog: A Dinosaur Novel Of Sorts*. Of the 30 or so books I've written, *Glog* is my favorite. That's one reason I enjoyed this program so much. Here's a copy of *Glog's* cover:

Yesterday's program was presented at Camp Milton, a Confederate earthwork fortification near the town of Baldwin, After enjoying the program on





fossils, Ginny and I roamed the fort grounds a bit. During the war, Fort Milton housed over 8,000 Confederate soldiers who would go into battle against the invaders at Ocean Pond.

The yankees killed one of my fore-bearers, a private named John Wilson Cowart—same name as mine—during that fight.

Here's a photo of Ginny stepping down a firing-step into a trench beside a reconstructed log barricade:



Speaking of guys with the same name, just before we drove to Baldwin, the mailman delivered a significant, huge, big check addressed to John Cowart—Alas, it was for my middle son, not for me. Johnny did not know a thing about this check. To him it came as an out-of-the-blue Godsend.

Since we were running late, I'd phoned to have him meet us at the curb in front of his house so I could drop his unexpected check off.

As we drove up, I held the unexpected check out the window and called out to Johnny, “Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy”!

Then we were off for our Christmas fun with fossils.



Wednesday, December 12, 2012
Chicken Christian and The Sad Lady

Jacksonville's doctors continue to play medical ping-pong with Ginny and me as the ball. They keep making appointments then calling to change dates and times and places. All this keeps us off balance.

The changes resulted in our having an unexpected free afternoon yesterday and we went to the library where we met the sad lady.

When I saw her come through the door, my heart dropped. I'm pretty sure we'd encountered her once back in June. I hoped she would not notice us. I suspect she is mental, or at least neurotic.

As we sat talking she sat nearby and overheard something nice I said to Ginny. Immediately she turned around and said, "Nobody's ever said anything like that to me".

I'm sure she did not recognize us from having met before, but she launched into her story.

Over 50 years-old, never married, no children, no friends, lives alone in a one-room apartment with a tv and a dog. Lonely, lonely, lonely. Has nephew out of state and out of touch.

"Christmas is the loneliest time of the year," she said.

She plans to buy a Chinese carry-out dinner with an extra egg roll for her Christmas dinner treat and eat it alone in her room.

A thought crossed my mind: *we can invite her for Christmas with our family.*

In years past we have taken in strays for the holiday. Jesus said that when you give a feast to invite in the hurt, lost and lonely off the streets and we have occasionally done just that. Our kids used to bring in stranded foreign students from college and even hitchhikers off the streets.

These folks have always fit right in with our mob.

There is no reason we can't take in this sad woman... but I chose not to.

Being a chicken Christian, I excused myself from the conversation and let Ginny listen to the lady's woes.

I pondered the ramifications of taking this lady in for the holiday, the logistics of driving her around, the minor tensions in my own family I'll have to moderate during Christmas, the problem of buying a few extra gifts for this stranger so she would not be left out.



And I pondered the extreme lack of energy Ginny and I both are laboring under recently. I decided that I just don't want to be bothered with this woman and her needs.

Practically every year of my adult life I have worked graveyard shift alone during Christmas. It doesn't kill you.

I recalled what my daughter Jennifer said recently, "Dad, your main Christian duty at this point in your life is to protect Mom".

I returned to the table and told Ginny it was time for us to leave. We picked up our stuff and walked out leaving the sad lady alone.

I think I did the right thing.

But it bothers me.



"I know! I'll run my Christmas screen savers!"

Saturday, December 15, 2012

A Sad Note For The Kid In The Attic

Someday in the far distant future, I hope some kid prowling in a dusty attic will stumble across a copy of my diary. He is the person I write for; everybody else just reads over his shoulder. I want the Kid In The Attic to glimpse how a Christian life is lived out for one ordinary guy, me, in this present age. Therefore, every once in a while, I mention current events as a peg for the Kid In The Attic to use as background.

This is such a sad, sad note.

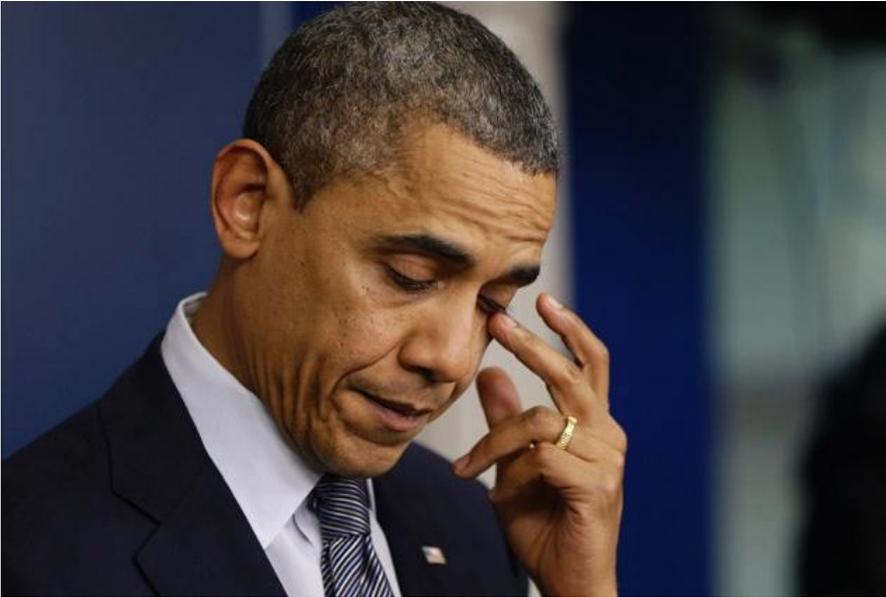


This past week North Korea launched a military satellite into orbit; and the U.S staged missiles and troops at the Turkish/Syrian border as Syria plans to gas rebel civilian populations into extermination; and Tuesday a gunman shot Christmas shoppers at a mall in Portland, Oregon; and Iran continues to develop nuclear weapons; and...

And yesterday, just days before Christmas, in Newtown, Connecticut, 20-year-old Adam Lanza, armed with two semi-automatic handguns, entered the Sandy Hook Elementary School and murdered his mother, seven other teachers, and 20 children all between the ages of five to ten years old.

After his shooting rampage, Lanza killed himself.

At a White House briefing, President Obama wept and wiped tears from his eyes as he commented on this slaughter of innocents .



How could such a thing happen?

When I was a little kid, one Christmas I heard about some kid hit by a car and killed. My little mind questioned why Santa (or God, I had the two confused in my mind back then... still do sometimes) Why Santa would let bad things happen at Christmas.

It just didn't seem right.

As an adult, I read *Practice Of The Presence Of God* by Brother Lawrence, a book which has greatly influenced my thinking ever since.



Someone asked Brother Lawrence why God allowed evil in the world?

Lawrence replied “that as for the miseries and sins he heard of daily in the world, he was so far from wondering at them, that, on the contrary, he was surprised there were not more, considering the malice sinners were capable of: that for his part, he prayed for them; but knowing that GOD could remedy the mischiefs they did, when He pleased, he gave himself no further trouble”.

Brother Lawrence has a point but his attitude does not completely satisfy me.

Yes, it is a wonder that there is no more evil in the world than there is. I mean look at morning traffic; It's a wonder that so many people drive more or less according to rules. It's a wonder that massive pipe-ups and carnage don't block every intersection.

Sin and evil are finite.

There is only so much damage evil can do.

Whereas God's love, forgiveness, and mercy are infinite. God did indeed so love the world that He sent His only begotten Son.

Why didn't that work?

Or did it?

I still wonder how God could let awful things happen around Christmas—or at any time for that matter.

And I feel helpless about fighting evil in the world.

Face it, I can't stop evil in the world. I've never been to Syria or Turkey, or Korea and I've only driven through Connecticut twice 40 years ago. What can I do about evil rampant in such places?

Diddle-squat.

The only evil I can do a thing about is the evil in my own heart.

And that's a big enough job!

Thing is, I'm just a sin dribbler. I engage in petty nastiness, sneaky resentment, private lust, secret hypocrisy—nothing that takes courage, nothing that will ever make a President weep.

Just Jesus.

And Jesus came to save petty sinners as well as gunmen.

But what about Christmas? Isn't this a time of Peace On Earth Good Will To Men?



Thing is, historically there was the virgin, there was a star, there were angels, there were shepherds watching in the fields by night, there were wise men, there was God Himself incarnate in a manger.

And there was also a Herod.

And a bunch of us mini-Herods.

That's why Christ came.

Sunday, December 16, 2012

Today's Post Is Brought To You By The Number 5, and By The Letters D, A, M, and N

Our street address contains the numbers 0, 2, 5, and 8.

But in the breezes generated by the fringe of Hurricane Sandy, the number 5 blew away and I could not find it.

So, I bought another 5 to replace it—a rash action.

Tiny nails secure the numerals to the sign board letting the mailman, or the rescue squad, if we need them again, know they've arrived at the right address.

Turns out the five I bought does not match the 8, 2, and 0 already in place. Different style font, different color—silver instead of black. Couldn't do anything about the font, but I used a permanent marker pen to color the 5 black.

Now all I'd have to do is nail the tiny nails. through the metal 5 having lined it up with the existing numbers. No problem... HA!

With my the macular degeneration of my left eye I see big things. I'd spent the morning watching squirrels across the yard raid our bird feeders; but small things close to me —like the food on my plate at lunch —disappear into my blind spot.

So, when I went to nail the 5 in place, I could not see the hole in the number; I fitted it in place with a pair of needle-nose pliers, placed the new five over the shadow of where the old 5 had been, and hammered.

The house sign board bounced.

The 8, 2, and 0 bounced off into Ginny's amaryllis bed. They buried themselves in the dirt. I had to abandon the 5 and crawl stomping flowers to find the 0, 2, and 8, Once I found them, I had to stand up.

Couldn't.



My severe degenerative arthritis in my right knee, shoulder and hip will not allow me to stand once I'm down. I have to claw my way up on my cane... I'd left the cane in the house.

Ever see a camel kneel?

That's me, a fat camel wallowing my way upright on the rain-gutter drain pipe, stomping amaryllis plants as I rose with grace unlike Venus emerging from the sea.

Had to nail the three numbers I'd knocked off back on. The nails I found to do the job proved too big to fit the little holes in the numbers. Using the tip of my pocket knife blade, I discovered the numbers were cast in iron. Drilled the holes bigger... Lost cause.

Tried to super-glue numbers to the board. Superglue would not hold. Glued the 8 to my fingers.

Pried the 8 off and got stuck on the 2...

Finally, with choice words of heart-felt prayer and thanksgiving (do you believe that?) I finished the job.

Now, if anybody wants to find us, just look for the house with stomped amaryllis plants at the front door.

Tuesday, December 18, 2012

Thin Jesus/Fat Jesus

Google news tells me that some folks gather in Siberia's Krasnoyarsk region expecting that place is the only ark to save them at the world's end.

At the same time, other people are drawn to a peak in the Carpathian Mountains saying its magnetic force will save them from an impending apocalypse. They say space aliens created the pyramid shaped peak thousands of years ago.

In January, 1974, some folks predicted that Comet Kohoutek foretold a colossal doomsday event to be right at hand

Earlier in history, some folks thought Jesus would return in 1914; and before that in 1848. And even before that, some folks named Napoleon as the Antichrist; and before him, the pope; and before him, Attila the Hun; and before him, Nero...

This year, some folks expecting destruction at the end of all days get set for December 20 when the Mayan Calender stopped dating days.



And back on May 21st last year, some folks preached Jesus would return to earth that day spreading destruction and bringing judgment on bad people.

Here, I am repeating my diary entry I made that day:

Sunday, May 22, 2011
Thin Jesus/Fat Jesus.

Some of my fellow fundamentalist Christians expected Jesus to appear at 6 a.m. yesterday in New Zealand.

News outlets, talk shows and cartoonists enjoyed a field day making fun of us Christians and mocking those who thought Christ would appear at that time.

I did not expect Him to return yesterday anymore than I expect Him any day, but that's neither here nor there.

Those believers who did hope for His appearance in New Zealand yesterday have been disappointed. They calculated the precise time and place from a formula factoring in Noah's Flood, the international dateline, and—can this be right?—a Mayan stone calendar.

According to the newspaper, "Some proponents predict it will all begin around 6 p.m. local time with a devastating earthquake in New Zealand and move time zone to time zone until it goes around the world".

Jesus did promise to return, but He stipulated no one would know when.

If you're interested, one place Jesus talked about such things is in the 24th and 25th chapters of Matthew's Gospel.

He said, "If any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is Christ, or there; believe it not...Behold, I have told you before. Wherefore if they shall say unto you, Behold, he is in the desert; go not forth: behold, he is in the secret chambers; believe it not. For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be. Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away. But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only....Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come".

Now, I do not know what happened in New Zealand.

But I do know that Jesus Christ appeared here in my hometown of Jacksonville, Florida, yesterday.

In fact Ginny and I saw Him appear a couple of times.



As we ate breakfast at a fast food place talking about the media stir over the anticipated return, Jesus appeared at the garbage can near the door. He was effectively disguised as a bum. He rummaged through the trash hunting leftover food scraps. He was rail thin in a way that made me think of why they call AIDS, the Slim Disease. He wore clothes several sizes too large for him. His pants bunched at his waist.

A Christian who sat near Ginny overheard our conversation about New Zealand. As this man left the restaurant, he gave Jesus a couple of dollars and told Him to buy some breakfast. Then the guy got in his car and drove away.

For I was hungry and you gave me food...

Ginny and I saw Jesus appear again when we stopped to gas up our own car—we drove to Georgia to buy my brand of pipe tobacco. This time Jesus appeared as a fat guy wearing a soiled sleeveless undershirt. He drove a beat-up gray car with New Jersey tags. Imagine that! Jesus disguised as a yankee! Unthinkable!

When Jesus puts on a disguise, He really puts on a disguise. Sometimes, He's really hard to recognize

Anyhow, Jesus explained that He needed a dollar to get gas enough to get home and a Christian at a nearby pump gave him enough to buy a couple of gallons. Jesus put gas in His tank and drove away.

I was a stranger and ye took Me in...

Ginny and I saw Jesus appear again just before we got home. Some people had been cleaning out their yard and put at the curb some old lawn chairs we could use. We stopped to pick them out of the trash heap and Jesus appeared calling from behind the screen door of the house next door.

This time Jesus appeared as a feeble old lady wearing a thin cotton housecoat. She ask if I could move two cement flower pots up onto her porch for her. I tried to lift one but it was too heavy for me, so Ginny had to grab one side and me the other to move those pots for old lady Jesus.

I was sick and ye visited me...

We got home, exhausted after a long day's driving. We kicked our shoes off. We threw sweaty clothes in the laundry hamper and put on swimsuits ready for a cool dip in our pool. Ready to soothe away the rigors of the hottest day of the season. And...

You guessed it.... Jesus appeared again. Right there on our back porch.



This time He wore His helpless, little animal costume.

Now, not to be disrespectful, when Jesus puts on His animal disguise, He's not the smartest possum in the woods.

Yes, Jesus appeared on our deck as a possum that had blundered into an animal trap that was not even baited! And He'd been trapped in the hot sun all day without water.

Now there was no way for me to slip a water bowl into the cage. I was afraid He would bite me if I put my hand in. Did you know that Jesus can have a nasty bite?

Immediately I filled a bucket with water and from outside the cage, I poured water over poor Jesus. He lapped it up eagerly.

But, nothing for it, we had to let Jesus out of the cage.

Tired as we were, we had to dress again. Put on hurting shoes. Unlock the gate, fold up the car seats, put the cage with Jesus in the back seat (on a plastic sheet. Jesus in His possum disguise is not housebroken), drive to a wooded area by the river to let Him go.

I was thirsty and ye gave Me drink... In prison and ye came unto Me...In as much as ye did it unto the least of these My brethren, ye have done it unto Me.

Yes, I don't know what happened in New Zealand on the other side of the world. But Jesus appeared here in Jacksonville yesterday.

Same as He does everyday.

Thursday, December 20, 2012
Kicking The Manger

Battling doctor's appointments and insurance companies fill our days recently—and no one on earth wants to hear our medical woes, lest I be accused of being boring. So today, I'm repeating this posting from my diary entry way back on Tuesday, December 12, of the year 2006:

You've got to kick our manger to start it.

Ginny & I think like tightwad skinflint Scrooges when it comes to buying Christmas gifts. All year long we shop at garage sales, jumbles, and thrift stores to buy gifts for the many people we care about — but can't afford to get things for in the local Family Dollar Store.

Yesterday we examined a unique manger scene we'd acquired for only \$3.98.



Let me emphasize that this item is a decoration only; it is paint and plaster and a computer chip. It bears no more religious significance to our actual faith than had it been a replica of a Daytona 500 race car.

Actually this device combines a tabletop fountain with a manger scene, a music box, and a motion sensor.

Some puzzled coolie worker in the Orient assembled this machine with no concept of western taste, religious or secular.

Ginny put batteries in the base and filled the reservoir with water. She flipped the switch on.

Nothing happened.

I glued the wisest of the wise men back in place. (I call him the wisest of the wise because he was the only one trying to escape).

She figured it was broken. But \$3.98 is no great loss if it did not work.

I fiddled with the device and discovered the motion sensor is out of whack — but, when you kick the manger, the star lights up, water flows over the waterfall, and the angel sings “Up On The Roof Top Reindeer Pause, Out Jumps Good Old Santa Claus”.

Actually, the angel does not so much sing as stand aghast at the tinny tintinnabulations of a western song played to notes on some oriental scale... Picture Andre Rieu with a kazoo instead of his Stradivarius .

The Crèche must play 15 or 20 such songs, but at the end of each piece of music, the star goes out and the waterfall ceases.

Yes, the trouble is, with the sensor out of whack, the only way this wonderful manger scene will start again is for someone to kick the coffee table it sits on.

Ginny and I sat for an hour taking turns kicking the manger, laughing our heads off, and trying to guess what possible song the thing was playing at the moment. “Jingle Bells” and “O Holy Night” we recognized; but much other music left us mystified.

Now, some folks might be offended by a Nativity Display that plays “Rudolph” but I delight in the combining of secular celebration with the holiest of Christian doctrines.

We do one because it’s fun; we observe the other because it’s real.

From the time our kids were tiny, we taught them that we all pretend there is a Santa because that’s so much fun; and that we worship Jesus Christ because He is God Almighty, Creator of Heaven and earth, Emanuel come down to earth as a helpless baby to save us from our sin.



It's hard to confuse the two facets of Christmas, secular and holy.

All indications from Scripture are that Jesus enjoyed secular celebrations like weddings and harvest feasts as well as Passover.

He enjoyed a firm grasp of reality.

The holy and the fun, each in its place, or both blend together with common sense and joy.

Some malls ban employees saying Merry Christmas in favor of Happy Holiday; some churches advocate renouncing decorated trees and giving gifts.

I think both parties need to get real!

Celebration, exuberance and joy are in our very nature. A hunger for the Holy One, a longing for His reality, a thirst for the pure joy of His presence is also deep seated within every heart.

What's to confuse?

To deny either one is to warp reality.

People aren't too dumb to know the difference.

It's odd but I think one of the songs our Creche plays is the Easter hymn, "Christ The Lord Is Risen Today", the very essence of the good news the angels proclaimed.

Another song on the menu contains the lines:

"Long lay the world in sin and error pinning Till He appeared and the soul found its worth".

Heavy stuff.

Wonderful stuff.

The essence of Christmas joy...

Such thoughts excite me, but, I'll get down off my soapbox now.

Ginny and I intend to keep our treasured manger. It works fine if you kick it. I could try to repair it but as Ginny said, "How can you tell if it's broken?"

So, we intend to keep kicking our manger to start the fountain, light the star and play the music.

No we aren't planning to give it to anyone else as a gift.

Some gifts are just too, too good to pass on.

Also, there is that Scripture about not casting pearls before swine ... (Er, not that I think there's anything wrong with swine, you understand).



My camera is still broken so I can't post a photo of our manger scene.

That's a shame.

Because our kickable manger is unique.

In fact, Ginny said, "I'll bet we're the first ones on our block to own one of these things".

Saturday, December 22, 2012
Thoughts About Religious Art

Each year Christmas challenges my scruples about religious art.

It's just my opinion, but I think most religious art I see reflects poor taste.

On Luminary Night last Sunday looking at Christmas lights a few blocks from our home, Ginny and I stopped at a house with a lawn display of a Nativity scene in which every figure—Virgin, angels, shepherd, wise men—all figures consisted of lighted pink plastic flamingos gazing into a nest with a glowing pink egg.

As a Florida native, that's my idea of great religious art.

Although I love to post cartoons illustrating some spiritual point in my blog, I draw the line about using overtly religious pictures. They make me uncomfortable.

Not all Christians feel that way.

And the Christmas season generates all sorts of religious pictures and figurines on everything from greeting cards to coffee mugs.

At the moment, I'm specifically looking at a Manger Scene Ginny and I bought on our honeymoon 43 years ago. It's the nicest one I've ever seen. Our Christmas tradition dictates that we display the charming little plaster figures of Mary, Joseph, Wise Men, Shepherds, sheep, cows, donkey... and Jesus as a baby.

Are these home decorations or are they idols in our house?

God Almighty abhors it when we worship anything or anyone less than Himself. His Ten Commandments start off with the words:

"Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God".



How does our little plaster manger scene on the bookcase, or any religious art for that matter, factor in with this commandment?

Now we do not pray to plaster.

Nor do we ascribe magical power to the figures.

Yet I recall the old country/western song:

I don't care if it rains or freezes,
Long as I got my little plastic Jesus
Up on the dashboard of my car!

Now some folks find religious imagery helpful in their worship of the Lord God. As I understand it, in ancient times when many European peasants could not read the Bible, incidents depicted in stained-glass windows or in carvings and statues, reminded them of the words and stories of Scripture. The religious imagery provided an aid to worship in Spirit and truth. That's a valid use of religious art.

But these same images can trap us.

The Prophet Isaiah said, "They shall be greatly ashamed, that trust in graven images, that say to the molten images, Ye are our gods".

He describes the process of making an idol from a wooden log:

"The carpenter stretcheth out his rule; he marketh it out with a line; he fitteth it with planes, and he marketh it out with the compass, and maketh it after the figure of a man, according to the beauty of a man; that it may remain in the house.

"He heweth him down cedars, and taketh the cypress or the oak,...He maketh it a graven image, and falleth down thereto.

"He burneth part thereof in the fire; with part thereof he eateth flesh; he roasteth roast, and is satisfied: yea, he warmeth himself, and saith, 'Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire':

"The residue thereof he maketh a god, even his graven image: he falleth down unto it, and worshippeth it, and prayeth unto it, and says, 'Deliver me; thou art my god'".

That cedar log was perfectly good growing as a tree in the woods or as it lay decomposing on the forest floor. It was a fine log when set afire to warm the carpenter or to cook his grits. It was a fine piece of wood as he carved it into a household object. However something changes when he addresses a prayer to it. Apparently nasty entities can attach themselves to material objects (or even people). And St. Paul said that such bad nasties stand gloating behind every idol men pray to.



Now a log is a log is a log. It is a thing. A created thing—not the Creator. He can not be pictured in wood carvings, metal castings, graven stone images, or in painted pictures. God is too big.

He can not even be comprehended in the most vivid human imagination of the smartest person. Too big for the telescope or the microscope. He holds us all and all created--everything from galaxies to grub-worms in His palm. The heavens and the heaven of heavens can not contain Him.

No artist captures His majesty—the majesty of the God who reduced Himself to become a Baby in a pile of straw.

I think the most powerful religious painting I've ever seen hung in Washington's National Gallery of Art—Salvador Dali's *Sacrament Of The Last Supper*. The painting stunned me when I first saw it. As I recall it is the only painting in the National Gallery to deserve a whole room all by itself.

But even that great work of art hangs paltry compared to the reality of God's Person.

OK. I have scruples about art. I don't want anyone to think I worship anything less than Christ Himself.

But what is the difference between art and idol?

Little statues fascinate me. Over the years at garage sales and such I've collected scads of them, including some which represent the gods and goddesses of ancient China, Greece and Rome. Such art charms me.

But once years ago while I taught the Bible books of Joshuah and Judges to a group, I decided I did not want idols, even idols manufactured as tourist souvenirs, in my house lest after my death some innocent cleaning out my junk might think these knickknacks influenced my faith in Christ.

I smashed and buried the lot of them.

That's me.

Not recommending it to anybody else.

I think I may have made a mistake by over reacting to harmless tourist geehaws..

I know these trinkets are bits of clay, rock, wood or metal. I agree with St. Paul who said, “We know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but the One”.



Yet, writing to Corinth he said, "My dearly beloved, flee from idolatry.... I say, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to devils, and not to God: and I would not that ye should have fellowship with devils".

Big words those.

Bad nasty spirits lurk behind every idol.

Of course Prophets in the Bible warn of the insidious danger of idols in the heart. Not in metal or stone, plaster or wood, but in human gut.

My gut.

Saint John's letter said, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols".

However, one of the old Puritan preachers warned, "Be ye not over pious".

My heart finds it's own idols. Idols more vile and dangerous than plaster Manger figurines. or my desk statue of Venus de Milo, or the plastic Thor with his hammer.

Our manger scene is a happy decoration with no more true religious significance than a picture of Frosty Snowman or Rudolph Reindeer.

I think I need to get over my iconoclastic scruples about religious art and become more broad minded..

Therefore, to show I am broad minded, I hereby post on my pious blog a religious picture of some historic saint or the other which I chanced across on line, but I doubt it might tempt anyone sensible to worship— unless he's a really sick puppy:





December 25, 2012
Merry Christmas



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Thanks to Mark Highum

12-19-2003

SEASON'S GREETINGS

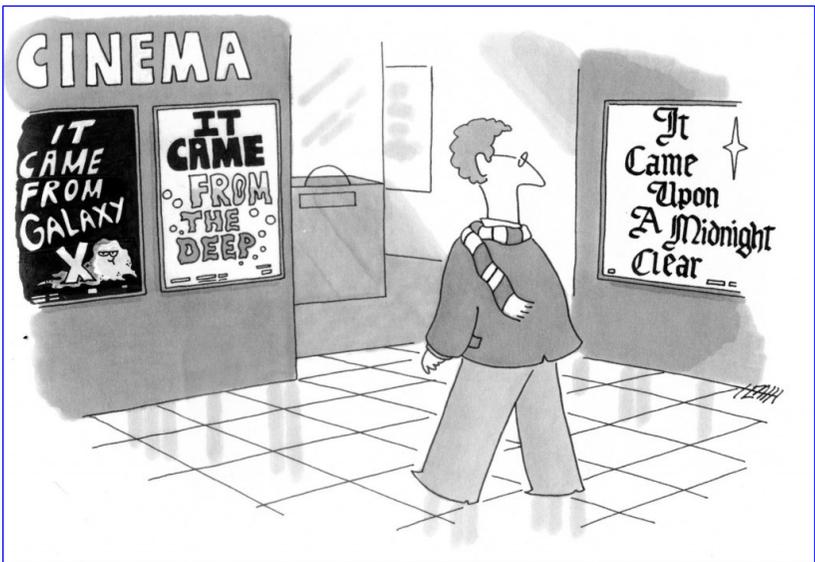




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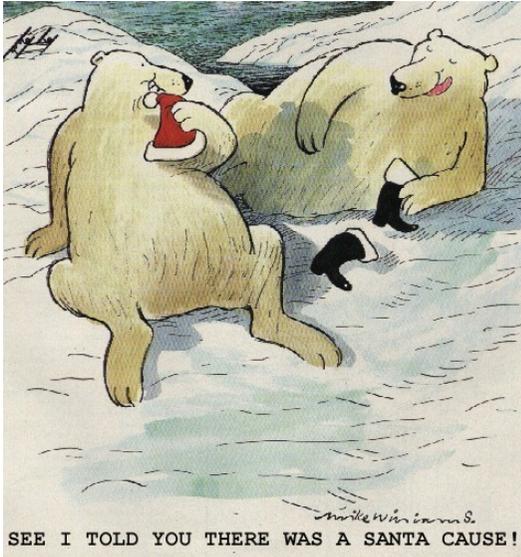


The night before Christmas, with the cat





December 26, 2012
The Day After Christmas



Sunday, December 30, 2012
Hand-Me-Ups get Me Down

I know all about hand-me-downs.

As the father of six grown children—my youngest is now 30+--I've seen many items of clothing, toys, furniture, etc. out-grown and shared from older kids to younger.

Now, in my dotage, the order reverses. As the kids out-grow electronic devises, they pass their outdated items up to me. And considering the life-span of high-tech stuff lasts only 15 minutes after the box gets opened, I'm getting a lot of stuff I have no idea how to operate.

When my sight began to fail, my daughter Eve, supplied me with a machine that plays what I call records but she calls DVDs. Readers record whole books on a tiny silver disc to be played on this machine with little gray buttons on black backgrounds which become invisible and cause great glee in Japan when Americans buy one.

And my daughter Jennifer gave me a tv with a remote thingy. This one has big buttons with symbols in Kurgustandaniese which only Mr. Spock speaks. With this remote I can turn the tv set on and turn it off—but I can't seem to change channels so I'm doomed to watch only the cooking network for the rest of my viewing life.



Yesterday, Donald and Helen came over and spent eight happy, care-free hours teaching me how to cut and paste on my new Ubuntu computer system.

I wonder if they will ever come by my house ever, ever, ever again?

They also got Ginny and me a new cell phone which plots the course of star constellations, locates the capital of Pandemonium on gps tracking, and figures the volume of a sphere.

I think it can all do phone calls—maybe. If we can figure out how to move the old address book to the new phone.

Our old phone rang and you answered it. If you did not answer it, intelligent callers figured it was ringing in an empty room.

The new phone has voice mail, texting, photo capability, tweets, and washes windows. Perfect gift for a guy who finds Scotch Tape dispensers challenging and to whom electric can openers would leave starving in the loaded pantry.

The thing is modern kids teathed on technology. They take to this stuff naturally.

Those of us who fought off Indians with sharp sticks find tech stuff frustrating.

However, I did take a photo of some Blue Mystic Orchids I gave Ginny for Christmas:





She snapped this photo of me with the phone yesterday:



We Tweeted the photos directly to God-Only-Knows-Where then downloaded them to the desktop computer.

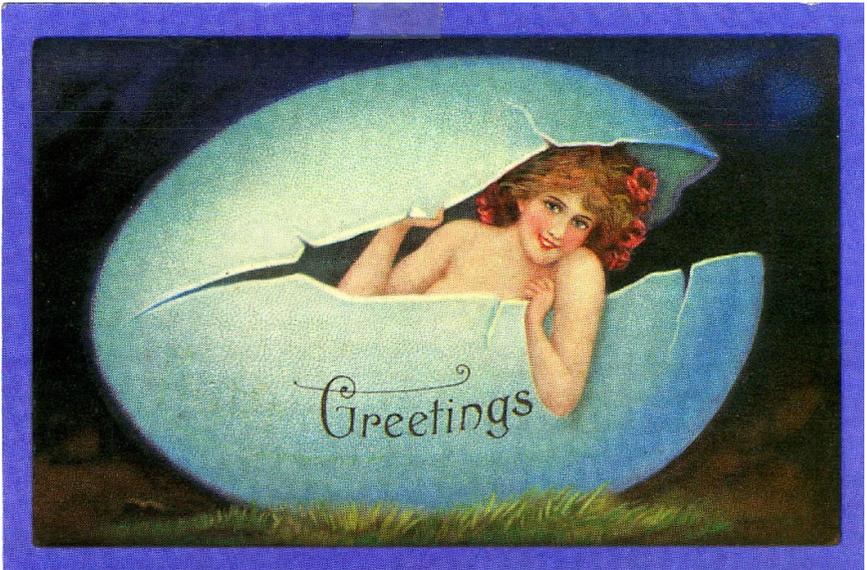
I'm proud of me—John Cowart, King Of Geriatric Geeks!

Someday, I'll figure out how to answer this phone if it ever rings—which I doubt because it gave us a new phone number which I can't remember because we had our old one for 20+ years.

I think somebody smart ought to invent a camera-phone designed for us old folks so we can survive the transition to modern times. My ideal high-tech devise would look like this:



**Thus ends the Year of Our Lord 2012. And now begins 2013
—Welcome to the New Year Babe:**



Now, for the fascinating tale of our life in the year 2013:



January 2013

Friday, January 11, 2013 For Medicinal Purposes Only

Each doctor Ginny and I visit hands us a packet of instruction sheets as we leave the office. Ginny collects these sheets into a binder which now has grown over two inches thick.

Yesterday as we lingered in the neurologist's waiting room, we read the ream of sheets given us by the cardiologist earlier in the week. We'd not had a chance to peruse these before.

Included in the instructions are pages about how changes in blood pressure relate to light-headedness and how to avoid fainting.

I read the following paragraph with interest:

*Contracting your muscles may help prevent, delay, or even stop a fainting spell... Research has found that flexing large muscle groups can boost blood pressure briefly to allow you time to lie down or sit down. **Squeezing the buttock muscles, tensing arm muscles, and gripping your fists can be effective.***

One phrase captured my attention.

So, when Ginny went up to the counter to fill out more paperwork, being a kind, Christian gentleman concerned about my wife's well-being, I crept up behind her and obeyed the medical advice the cardiologist had given.

She slapped my hands away.

I showed her what the instruction sheet says.

And again I tried to give her an advanced treatment. Purely in the interests of medical care, you understand.

The doctor's instructions work; I feel better already.

But Ginny slapped my hands away and called me a dirty old man.

My wife is proving to be a difficult patient.

Saturday, January 12, 2013 Exasperated & Exhausted

Yesterday outside air temperature here in Jacksonville, Florida, hovered around the 80 degree mark; inside Dr. Downey's office it abruptly dropped to near 20 when he suggested yet another test for Ginny to take.



She bristled!

My poor exasperated Love has been tested out.

No More Tests, she declared.

Dr. Downey actually fled his office at her hostility. I think he feared getting a sudden colostomy himself as she grew more and more angry.

Only once before in our 44-year marriage have I seen Ginny angry. That was back when she chased a government inspector who was hassling me back to his car threatening him with a broom.

When we left the doctor's office I took her home to cool off. We planed to spend the weekend relaxing. dabbling in our garden, photographing birds, and calmly evaluating what to do from here.

Not to be.

Last night the phone rang.

Officials at the homeless shelter where Fred, my eldest son, has been living (by choice) kicked him out. He called telling me about the incident which he says was not his fault but he got blamed for it.

He asked me to drive downtown and bring home his possessions—a backpack, a bag of clothes, and some books—to store at our house till he finds another place to crash.

I felt too exhausted to go at that moment, and I can't see to drive safely at night anyhow. So, I promised to go get his stuff and try to get him settled somewhere or another this morning.

The Scripture says “As is thy day, so shall thy strength be”... I sure hope that's true for me today.

Monday, January 14, 2013

Snake In The House

This January Florida offers balmy temperatures in the 80s, but that is not all my home state offers.

So, yesterday as I was in the water vacuuming the pool, Ginny walked out on the deck and said, “John, there's a snake in the house”.

As I climbed the ladder out of the pool I asked her about the snake's color and size to determine if it were one of the four venomous species that find a home here in Florida. Her answers assured me that it was not poison.

Dripping wet I walked to the shed to fetch a tool I made which has a spike on one end and a hook on the other. We use it to snag branches and



lower birdfeeders within reach but it's just the thing for picking up a snake without hurting it.

The snake lingered in our entrance foyer where we had to move several chairs, books and a potted plant.

Thank God the snake did not slither behind the bookcases or under the door into the coat closet. I'd never have gotten him if he had.,

I examined to make sure he had no rattles, no red/yellow bands, copper head, nor cotton-white mouth, Looked safe to me. The little brown snake measured about 18 inches long.

I slid the steel hook beneath his belly and lifted him toward the door.

He dropped off and made for the bookcase.

I gently pinned his body with my tool and picked him up by hand, took him outside and released him in the bromeliad bed where some vile neighborhood cat might attack him.

O the joys of living in Florida.

We did not need this. After seeing 19 (I counted) doctors since mid November, we've had enough problems in our life already. But Ginny said she'd rather hunt a snake in our living room than to spend another minute in a doctor's waiting room.

With the snake safely removed, Ginny and I speculated about how the creature might have entered our house.

Had he come in some crack?

Had he come in the house for warmth? How long has he been in our house before Ginny first saw him?

Had we brought him inside, unnoticed, coiled around one of her potted houseplants?

Or was the poor snake seeking refuge from the 800 snake hunters licensed Saturday by Florida to kill pythons downstate?

Yes, Saturday began the 2013 Python Challenge sponsored by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

According to an *ABC News Report*:

“Some estimate that nearly 150,000 pythons are living in the Florida Everglades. Officials say the Burmese pythons are eating wildlife and with no natural predator, the population is overwhelming. The Everglades have become crowded with the snakes and the pythons have started to move into nearby neighborhoods”.



"They're starting to come back into civilization looking for easy food -- our pets and that's typically what they're feeding on: Cats, small dogs," said Lt. Scott Mullin of the Miami-Dade Venom One Unit.

Yes, Miami needs Venom Units; How many does your city have?

Pythons are native to Southeast Asia, but experts think that residents who couldn't handle them as pets set them loose.

Last year, a Burmese python was caught and registered which measured more than 17 feet long and 160 pounds. The catch set a new Everglades National Park record.

Burmese pythons caught in Florida usually only average 6 to 9 feet long.

A \$1,500 reward will be handed over to the hunter who catches the most Burmese pythons. A \$1,000 reward will be given to the person who catches the longest. The hunt lasts till till midnight February 10th.



I told Ginny I wish I were registered with the Commission so I could claim the reward. She says prize money only goes to hunters of snakes caught outside in the swamp—not in a home.

Phooey! Just my luck.

Besides, mine was only a garden snake, not a python.

Hey, when they're in your living room underneath your rocking chair, all snakes look like giant pythons.

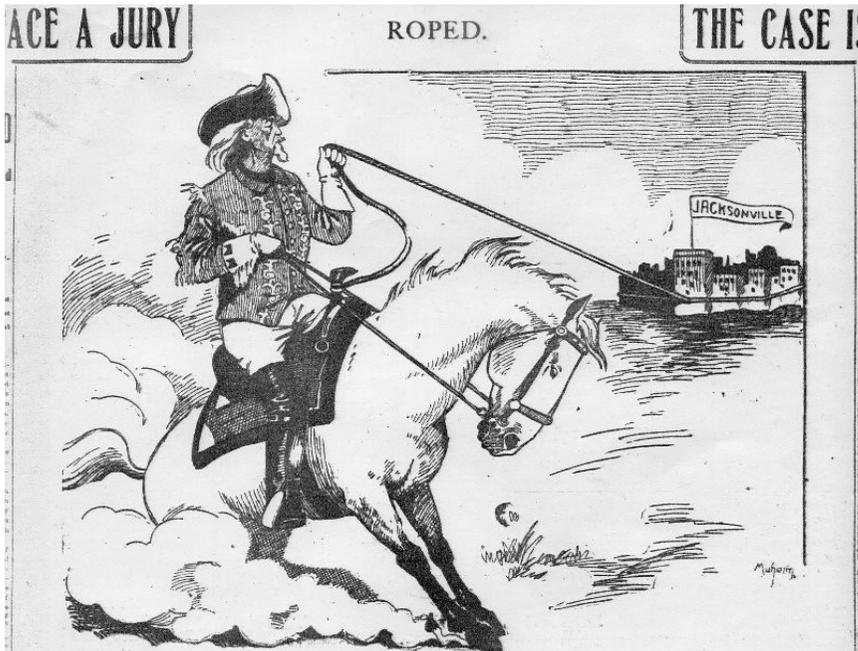


Wednesday, January 16, 2013

Snowbirds, Prayer, and King Crabs

Seeing a notice for the circus coming to town soon made me think of Buffalo Bill in Jacksonville. The circus plays Jacksonville on its way to winter headquarters in Sarasota. It follows a grand tradition.

During the 1870s and through the early 1900s Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show toured cities around the world, but wintered here in Jacksonville to escape the ravages of the north's cold weather. Here is a copy of a local editorial cartoon from those days:



William Cody noted as a famous Indian fighter and showman, used his time in Jacksonville to escape bills (the financial kind), to rest his troop, and to promote his show. He and his wife knew how to create free publicity for the performers and actors.

For instance, once the couple garnered headlines by announcing they were divorcing because of his adultery. Mrs. Cody named as correspondent—Queen Victoria!

Yes, the Wild West Show came to Jacksonville as snowbirds in winter. *Snowbirds* is what we natives call northerners who flock to Florida in winter then go back north when Spring arrives—I won't say what we call yankees who come to stay.



Snowbird is also a popular, bur contemptuous, Florida term for unemployed homeless folk who drift South to survive winter. In cold weather Jacksonville's homeless population triples or more every season. Panhandlers inundated city parks, streets, libraries, and shelters seeking to stay warm.

Bums downtown are bad for business. So since the days of Buffalo Bill, city government and merchants try hard to get rid of them.

Maybe with good reason. Look at a U.S. map and consider that all nuts roll downhill. They all gravitate to Florida.

Friday, Fred, my eldest son, called to say he'd been kicked out of the homeless shelter where he's been staying because of a behavioral problem—his or someone else's. He is back to sleeping wrapped in a blanket beneath a downtown bridge.

Fred does this by choice.

He does not want to stay in any of the many other homeless shelters available to him. He phoned asking if I would store his backpack and other possessions till he settles somewhere else.

Ginny and I drove down the largest city shelter on Monday afternoon and picked up his stuff. In the compound, hundreds of homeless people in every state of dress and distress lingered with nothing obvious to do. In spite of some minor bickering, they appeared to enjoy a sense of camaraderie.

Fred told us that many of them are crazy as loons.

Maybe so, they may be crazy but they are not the ones sleeping under a bridge tonight.

As we sorted the garbage bags containing all my son's worldly goods, a park policeman checked us out; I told him we were helping one of our kids move. As father of six kids, how many times have I done that!

Got Fred squared away as best we were able and stored his stuff under plastic in my tool shed.

Not my happiest day.

Earlier Monday morning I had been to breakfast as usual with Johnny, my middle son, and my friend Wes. Afterwards we joined Ginny and talked about giving, charity, and prayer.

I questioned why when I pray for someone, snowbirds for example, I feel as though I've done nothing?



Johnny pointed that what seems to be nothing when we pray is actually God setting things up for a good which may not happen for six months.

Wes said that Our Lord takes requests; He does not obey orders. We should pray if for no other reason than The Boss told us to.

Ginny observed that it is not necessary for me to know when or why or how God answers prayer. He tells me what to do, He does not need to go over the results with me for my approval.

Much of the time we see no immediate answer to our prayer; but sometimes we do and that's a thrill.

Johnny gave the instance of a needed repair to his truck.

And Wes, an accomplished organist, told about buying an antique organ with leather bellows in bad repair to restore. Wes said there were no plans or instructions related to this ancient organ and a particular piece had deteriorated and was missing. He prayed about it and that very night in a dream he envisioned a picture, "Like a Polaroid", of the very shape doodad he was missing. He hand-crafted it, and his organ played fine afterwards.

As usual in our Monday morning bull sessions, I provided enlightenment and comic relief with one of my tasteful tales of refined Christian humor:

Up in Alaska this guy's wife committed suicide by jumping in the bay. Days passed without her body being found. Then the cops came to the distraught husband and excitedly announced. "We've recovered your wife's body out of the bay. When we pulled her up, there were 17 huge King Crabs and 32 blue crabs clinging to her. Since she's your wife, we'll split the catch with you when we pull her up again tomorrow".

Friday, January 18, 2013

Lollipop

Call me Lollipop.

Wednesday as Ginny and I drove to yet another doctor's appointment, we passed a site where a big yellow bulldozer was plowing under an old house.

I remember that place... almost.

Years ago the old building hosted a safehouse for battered women; they hid there from abusive boyfriends or husbands.

How did I, a male, know that?

Well, the ladies and some children lived without laundry facilities in that house.. Some good-hearted Christian (I do not remember who it was)



bought them two brand new new washers and dryers. But alas, their benefactor did not pay for the stuff to be delivered and installed.

The pastor of the church Ginny and I attended at the time asked me to deliver and install the appliances. He—and virtually everyone else I know—thought, *John is only a writer and since he does not work, he can do any errand we ask.*

Being a Christian wimp, I usually agreed to do such tasks.

Just call me Lollipop.

I borrowed a truck from someone (don't remember who), picked up the appliances from the store, and drove them to the address where the house mothers, two belligerent female persons seething with hostility, watched me strap the machinery to a dolly and lift them off the truck. Hanging at my elbow, these female persons oversaw my every move. They resented my being there and they gave every evidence of hating me.

Ted Bundy would have received a warmer greeting in that house.

Maybe that's who they expected. Perhaps life experience had taught them to hate males and these house mothers felt overprotective of the women in their care. Or maybe I just look shady and vicious.

They offered no help in unloading or hooking up the gifts they were receiving. They would not even hold a door open for me. They certainly did not offer a word of thanks for the brand new free laundry equipment-- or for my work.

No good deed...

I made the delivery, returned the truck to whoever, and promptly forgot the incident until this week when I saw the house being demolished.

Ginny said cryptically (and maybe complimentary) “John, that's just what I would have expected from you”.

As we drove over the Acosta Bridge, we got to talking about another odd incident of our trying to help a person in need and it backfiring. If you're interested in that funny happening, check out *Two Men In A Ditch* from my blog archive for September 5, in the year 2005.

Yes, I told him to die in the ditch; That's the kind of Christian I am.

Just call me Lollipop.

No good deed...

Speaking of which, Wednesday I was accused of being a thief.



Last year I helped a guy format and publish a manuscript he'd written. Because of his straightened circumstances, I worked untold hours without charging him a penny. He complained about the deal constantly.

Over the past six months, not one single copy of his book has sold and he has been in the hospital seriously ill.

But this week he got out of the hospital and felt well enough to resume complaining. He phoned me because he'd heard some film company making a movie using the same one-word title for their movie as he had used for his book. He implied that I had sold film rights to his work without paying him, thus stealing money due him.

I googled the one-word title and find over 22,000 uses of that word. The movie being made in Korea is about a shapely young girl being stalked by a vampire; my friend's book is about fat men engaged in gluttony.

I assured the writer that the titles were coincidental and urged him to check out the film plot for himself.

It upset me to be accused of one of the few sins I have not committed.

No good deed...

Just call me Lollipop.

As Ginny and I turned into the parking lot at the doctor's office, we laughed about another incident from about 20 years ago:

One hot July afternoon I'd dropped Ginny at work over on the east side of Jacksonville, the city's oldest section, and I was walking down Duval Street to catch a bus home.

A U-Haul truck blocked the sidewalk in front of an elegant old mansion with white columns and a wide veranda. a house which I suspect had survived the 1901 Great Fire of Jacksonville.

Four attractive young women struggled to get a heavy hide-a-bed sofa off the truck and up the stairs into the house.

As an observant Christian, I noticed they wore short shorts and halter tops.

Call me Lollipop.

I valiantly offered to help. Three girls got on one end of the sofa, one girl and I lifted the other end. We sat it in front of a fireplace in the large pallor of the magnificent old home. We carried in end-tables, overstuffed chairs, etc. Bedroom furniture went on the second floor. Hot, heavy work. Their air-conditioning had not been turned on yet.



The friendly girls offered me a beer from their cooler as we finished moving them into their new abode. I did not ask but I assumed these very friendly girls were college students establishing a sorority house. We had a great time arranging furniture just to their liking.

They thanked me profusely for my help as we finished the hot dusty work. And as I left to catch my bus, one, a true Southern Belle, said, “Y'all be sure to come back to see me, Yah hear”.

I may be oblivious but I thought nothing of the incident till about a month later a photo of the Duval Street mansion caught my eye on page B-1 of the local newspaper. Police had raided the place, arrested a number of people, and closed down the newly-opened whorehouse!

I'm so dense. It never occurred to me that the friendly girls I'd helped move were not establishing a sorority house.

Ginny laughed saying, “John, they ought to call you Lollipop”.

“Because I'm so sweet”?

“No. because you are such a sucker when you see people in need”.

Sunday, January 20, 2013

A Pizza And A Cube

Although I am 73 years old, today for the first time in my life, I ordered a pizza to be delivered to my home.

Yes, you can do that now.

What will they think of next?

Here's another wonder:

Since I saw one at Christmas, I've been seeking all over for a gadget I wanted. It's a folding cube that tells a Bible story. I've asked folks, called distributors, checked in stores. Couldn't find one.

Then, I finally thought of looking for it online.

You can find things that way you know.

Found it.

And, what's more, when I found it online, I discovered I don't need it. Somebody else got there first. And they do it better than I could.

Thing is, my son Donald wanted me to make a video; I thought this intriguing gadget would make a good prop for such a thing. But a young man named Jeremy Chambers has already posted such a video on U-Tube.



He not only looks better than I do, but he also gives a cool presentation of the cube. You can watch his video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJ3wi3mWriE>

Pizza, cool videos—all out of my computer.

What will they think of next?

Wednesday, January 23, 2013

From Things That Go Bump In The Night

Yesterday as Ginny and I returned home from the library, we narrowly averted a four-car collision when an impatient driver decided to pass on the right while running a stoplight across the railroad tracks.

Several cars, including ours, missed a pile-up by a hair's breath.

Afterwards we knew we'd escaped a serious accident and flaming death by inches.

Years ago I sat talking on the church steps with a friend. My friend said something and I turned my head to the right to look at him when someone shot at me. The bullet hit the stone wall just beside my left ear. Had I not turned my head at that instant, I'd be dead.

Again, after the event I knew I'd escaped by inches.

But we don't always know when we've escaped danger. A few weeks ago Ginny and I left the bank about ten minutes before a gunman robbed the place. And we did not know we'd been at risk till we saw about the robbery on the 6 O'clock News.

Our after-dinner prayer last night included a phrase, "Lord, protect us from the dangers of this night and from the fear of them".

As we prayed that, I remember thinking, *What dangers? Here we are locked in our snug little home, wrapped in warm robes, ready to watch a movie on tv, read for a few minutes, then drift off to sleep.*

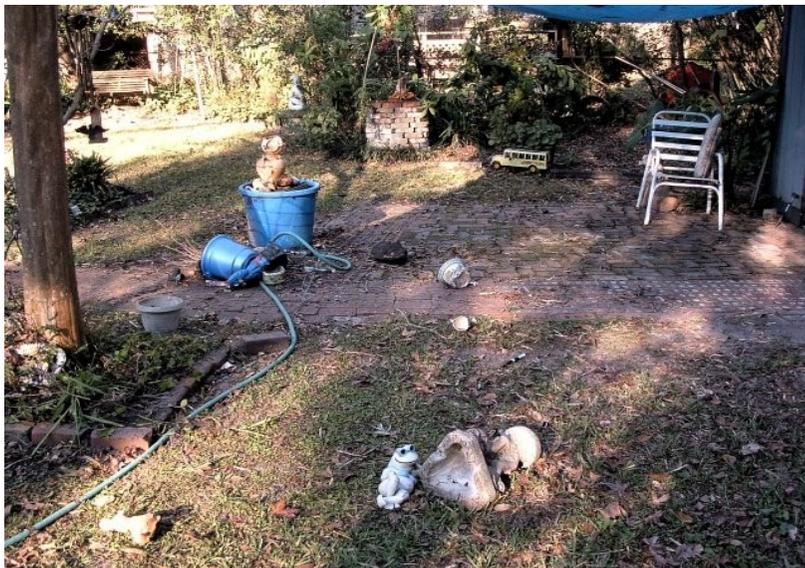
What do I know?

As Ginny made coffee this morning, she glanced out the window into our garden.

She saw destruction.

We'd spent much of the day Monday planting bulbs, raking leaves, getting things tidy. When we went to bed our garden looked neat and orderly, charming.

This morning:



Something or someone in the night overturned flower pots, smashed statues, uprooted bricks, pulled the waterhose through flowerbeds, overturned chairs. Tore apart garden lights, and left a pathway of destruction.

And we slept peacefully unaware of what was happening just outside our bedroom window.

I find no tracks indicating who or what had done this.

The wanton destruction is a mystery.

Were we ourselves in danger from the marauder?

“From gouldies, and ghosties, and long-legged beasties, Good Lord preserve us”.

Who knows how many times God has protected us from whatever without our even being aware of any danger?

Yet, I'm inclined to squawk at any adversity I do encounter as though God had neglected His duty towards me. I don't realize that I have no idea what is going on in life. I just think I do.

I don't know when I've been protected; and I don't know when I've been blessed.

Oh well, good to know that Jesus died for the dense too.



Friday, January 25, 2013

Tigerman and I are Bible-Believing Fanatics

Sometimes people look at me as though I'm crazy when it comes out in conversation that I am a Bible-Believer.

Who can blame them?

What kind of guy would base his life on a 2,000-year-old Book which devotes an inordinate amount of space telling how to cut a bull's throat without getting blood on your shoes?

They've got a point.

Hey, I don't even own a bull; so what has the Bible to do with me? And why would I regard the stuff in its pages as relevant to my life today?

Let's face it, parts of the Bible read like the Microsoft HELP menu. It may make sense to somebody somewhere in the universe, but much is gobbledygook to me.

So, what do I think when I read the Bible?

The first thing I try to realize is that as some wise person (I forget just who) said, "When the plain sense of Scripture makes sense, that is the sense".

For instanced, when St. Luke says, "Two of them went that same day to a village called Emmaus, which was from Jerusalem about three-score furlongs, they talked together of all these things which had happened".

That makes sense. Two guys walked from Jerusalem to the town of Emmaus, talking as they walked; no obscure meaning there.

When the plain sense makes sense, that is the sense.

Another thing I try to remember is **who said what**.

If the Bible declares, "Thus saith the High and Holy One that inhabiteth eternity..."

That's something for me to pay attention to.

On the other hand, consider the quote, "Skin for skin! Skin for skin, yea, all that a man hath will he give for his life".

Is that a biblical principal for me to live by? That I should preserve my life at any cost?

Well, look at who said it in the Book Of Job: "Satan answered the Lord, and said, 'Skin for skin, yea, all that a man hath will he give for his life'."

Yes Scripture records the words of the devil as well as the words of the Lord; In reading the Bible, I should be aware of who said what.



Job offers another good example of that. This book records long speeches about God given by five men—Job, Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar and Elihu—But at the end of the book, God steps on stage and says to the others, “Ye have not spoken of Me the thing that is right as My servant Job has”.

But the things the bad guys say sound so reasonable to me. I'd like to think God is like they say He is. I'd like to quote them to prove my point. And they seem nicer than Job—but they are wrong.

Yes, the Bible does record wrong ideas, deeds, and words of men—so I need to be aware of who is saying what in Scripture.

Then again, I also need to **be aware of who is being spoken to**.

An old hymn says, “Every promise in the Book is mine. Every chapter, every verse, every line”.

A noble sentiment, but false.

Some words of God have nothing to do with me. They are addressed to someone else, and are none of my business. When a passage begins, “Wives...” since I am not a wife, nothing there pertains to me. It's like reading Ginny's mail for me to dwell on such a passage.

But when the Scripture says, “Husbands...” because I am a husband, I should pay attention. Those words are meant for me.

The other day my friend Wes pointed out that some words recorded in Scripture apply only to the person being addressed and to no one else. He cited the example, “The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee and the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee therefore that Holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God”.

The angel spoke those words to Mary and to no one else in the history of the world.

But why does the Scripture contain things which apply to no one else other than the person addressed?

Wes said those words are recorded for us, not to us; God allows us to be insiders on some private conversations..

And, like when we were kids and finally got to sit at the grown-up table, we thrill to overhear what the adults are talking about.

Wes feels some of the promises concerning prayer fall into this category; Jesus promised the Apostles certain things and we may misappropriate them when we claim grown-up religion for ourselves.

So, in reading the Bible I need to be aware of which person or group the words are addressed to.



Then again, some words in the Bible pertain to every soul on earth. Who disputes the instruction, “Be ye kind to one another”?

But when I think Bible words apply to everybody, I get into trouble; that mind-set makes me think everybody ought to be, act, and think like me.

When I apply Scripture to other people, I come across as a pompous ass.

Thing is: nowhere does the Bible tell me what other people ought to do. It only says what I, John Cowart, ought to do. In His Sermon From The Mount, Jesus uses the word YOU, 207 times. He never says how other people ought to treat me, only how I ought to treat them.

Sometimes that's a bummer.

But, there's a out—maybe I can read the Bible as poetry, **metaphorical poetry** at that. I can think, *This is what it says, but what God really means is that.*

What a crock!

When Ginny and I first dated, back when she wore a '60s hairdo, I sweettalked her comparing her to a Florida palm tree—tall, slender, elegant, stately, and bushy on top.

That' was a metaphor. It meant she is beautiful. But like all metaphors, it contains an element of literal truth—if I rub her the wrong way, I get splinters!

Here's a biblical example: In Psalm 19, King David uses a metaphor to describe the laws of God; he says:

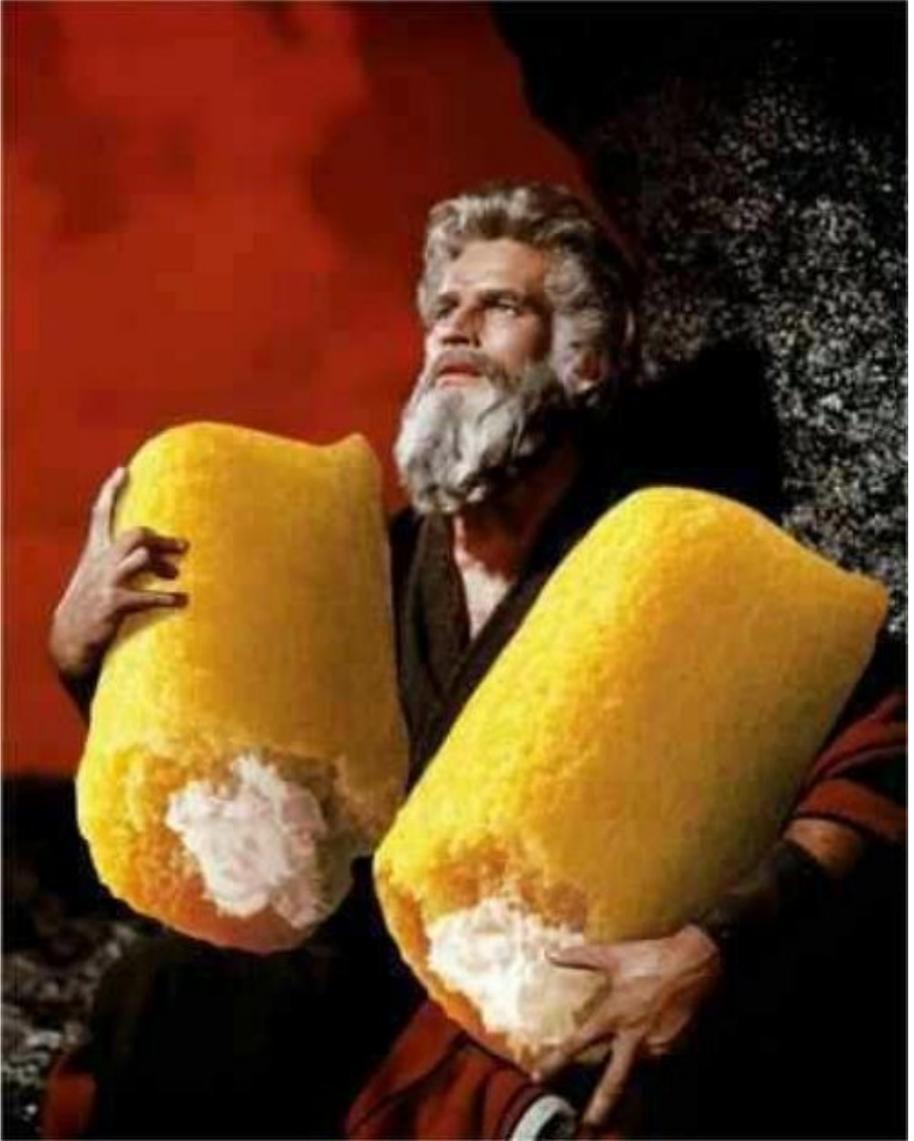
“More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold: sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb”.

It's easy to test that Scripture for literal content.

Open the Bible to any page and lick it.

It tastes like ink and paper, not like honey.

Common sense tells me that the Psalm's image compares Gods Word to sweet stuff. Ignore the metaphor in Scripture and you come up with a ridiculous picture:



I try to understand the words when reading the Bible. I think a common desk dictionary is the best Bible study tool there is.

However, as Thomas 'a Kempis, author of *Imitation Of Christ*, said, “I had rather feel compunction than know the definition thereof”.

But sometimes a Bible Dictionary does help me.

For instance, usually the word *mule* refers to the well-known long-eared animal; but, in Genesis 36:24, the Bible tells of a man named Anah who



"found the mules in the wilderness, as he fed the asses." There are not two kinds of animals mentioned here. A check of my Bible Dictionary showed that "The Mules" in this instance refers not an animal but to "a warm spring of water" -- that's what Anah discovered.

I could live without knowing that, but I find it interesting.

Knowing that the Bible says Anah discovered a spring in the desert does not help me to be a better Christian, or husband, or father, or neighbor, or employee.

So, how much of the Bible do we need to understand to follow Christ?

Little.

Very little.

Very, very little.

About 50 years ago I knew a mentally retarded man who worked for the circus. His job was hosing out animal cages, so everybody called him Tigerman. When the circus passed through town Tigerman and I would get together for lunch.

Once, I asked him why he was also a Christian like me.

He furrowed his eyebrows in concentration and tried to tell me.

He said, "For God..."

Tigerman stumbled and tried again, "For God so loved..."

He struggled to remember the verse, then he brightened and said, "For God so loved the world, that He did something or the other".

What more Bible does anyone need to know?

Monday, January 28, 2013

Poor Bandit Never Stood A Chance

Here is an odd clipping from our our local tv station at <http://www.news4jax.com/>:

LAKE CITY, Fla. - A Lake City man who attempted an armed robbery in a Lake City home may have got more than he bargained for.

Police say on Friday Derek Lee, 24, entered a house on Lakeview Avenue where the homeowner had 14 women over for a jewelry party. Police say Lee was wearing a dark ski cap on his head along with a bandana across his face. He allegedly showed a gun and ordered the women to hand over their money and phones.



One woman who thought it was a party gag pushed his hand aside while laughing saying, "It's only a water gun." Police say at this time Lee held the gun to that woman's head and said, "I'm not joking, I'm going to shoot someone, give me your money."

Jackie Hagler, who owns the house, says she then put her faith into action.

"When I realized what was going on, I stood up and said, 'In the name of Jesus, get out of my house now.' And he said, 'I'm going to shoot someone.' And I said it again, real boldly," Hagler said. "Everybody started chanting, 'Jesus, Jesus, Jesus,' and he did a quick scan of the room, and ran out the door as fast as he could go."

Police say based on the description given by the victims, investigators were able to identify Lee and place him in a photo lineup. Several of the ladies at the jewelry party pointed out Lee, who was then arrested at his home at 11:17 p.m. Friday.

Lee was booked into the Columbia County Detention Center on a \$200,000 bond for home invasion robbery.

Hagler says she hopes Lee eventually gets the message.

"I have forgiven him and prayed for his salvation," said Hagler. "I'm hoping this situation has led him to trust the lord and turn his life around."

Sunday, February 3, 2013

Call Saint George!

Somebody ought to call Saint George—you know, patron saint of England, 4th Century Christian knight who slew the dragon.

I'm so weary.

Somebody ought to call Saint George. He's needed around here.

Poor Ginny stays ghastly weak after her cardiac event in November. The slightest activity drains her energy. I act after a fashion as her nurse and caregiver.

Call St. George!

My poor dear has hardly any appetite for my cooking. She's lost 13 pounds over the past three weeks. She feels too poorly to even go out to eat. So, yes, I do what cooking and cleaning there is to be done around here. So, somebody ought to call St. George.

I engineered a minor kitchen mishap based on inattention, weariness, and pure stupidity Wednesday. See, I'm frying ham slices for supper while



microzapping sweet potatoes and some green veggies—but the ham would not brown.

I flipped the slices over.

The microwave beeped. Still the slices would not fry.

I set the table and poured tea. Still the ham would not fry.

As is my wont, I cursed the Japanese because my dinner was not cooking. This went on for 20 or 30 minutes...

Then, I scorched my hand on a different stove burner—the one that I'd turned on, not the one I placed the frying pan on! No wonder my slices would not fry. My apologies to the Japanese, they are innocent.

See why I think someone should call St. George?

According to the legend, when a dragon menaced a pagan village, the people tied a maiden to a rock for the dragon to eat instead of pillaging their town. That's why St. George fighting the dragon pictures always include a maiden chained in the background for him to rescue.



Anyway, Thursday, I called a local Presbyterian church and signed up as a charity case in their Meals On Wheels program. I'm just too tired, weary, and confused to cook anymore. I feel like a fraud registering on

this aid because this ministry of delivering hot meals to the elderly I think of as being for folks much worse off than Ginny and I are.

But, I'm so tired I signed up anyhow.

Another thing that makes me worn out is that I overestimate my strength and energy. This week, besides taking care of Ginny, I decided I wanted more flowers in our garden. I crawled on hands and knees planting about 80 gladiola bulbs.

They may blossom beautifully in a couple of months, but the effort cost me greatly. By the time I finished, I snapped at Ginny and acted like a grump.

Yes, I love her with all my heart, but I get a little grumpy in love:



So, all things considered, I think it's time to change.

Call St. George! Call St. George.

Call St. George, 'cause my ass is a'dragin.



Monday, February 4, 2013

My Superbowl Commercial and Cathy's Mom

To buy a 30-second commercial during last night's Superbowl watched by millions of viewers the world over, costs \$4,000,000.

Every year, I run an ad for my www.bluefishbooks.info website selling my books during Superbowl, but lacking a handy \$4,000,000, every year I do an end-run around the price.



Last year I influenced a cheerleader to have my site logo tattooed on a strategic part of her anatomy. But she cheered so enthusiastically that my book logo blurred in the jiggle.

Cowart Communications
Jacksonville, FL
www.bluefishbooks.info

The year before, I arranged for my Bluefish Books logo to be engraved on the hoof of a Clydesdale; but my horse stepped in something left by one of the horses in front and nobody got to see my sneak Superbowl ad.

So, for my Superbowl ad last night, I gave Jimmy, my 11-year-old neighbor who is a computer whiz (He's really good at *Angry Birds*), \$20 to hack into the giant tv screen in the New Orleans stadium. He would piggy-back my ad on a beer commercial so that the Jumbotron would run my Bluefish Books Logo and show how people who buy my books improve their lives in innovative ways.





Unfortunately, Jimmy, who is too young to know better, typed *Light Bulb* instead of *Bud Light* into his computer, and when he punched Alt/Con/Y?% on his keyboard, it sparked a fuse in the stadium and remotely blacked out the game for twenty minutes.

I hope no one noticed.

I'll try to air my www.bluefishbooks.info commercial for free again next year.

On a note more serious than a delay-of-game penalty, yesterday afternoon my friend Cathy, an airline flight attendant, came by our house to discuss a problem with me. She often visits every month or two when she's on a lay-over in Jacksonville.

Although she has an established home in Charlottesville, North Carolina, her job takes her all over the world. She's been with the air line a number of years and hopes to retire from them. She loves her work in spite of her "interesting" customers and erratic hours. When she's home, she loves her unwinding routine in the peace of her own home. Blaze in the fireplace, view of the mountains, glass of wine, soothing music, solitude from demanding people...

Too good to last.

Here comes the bomb.

Her elderly mother just announced that she wants to sell her own condo and move in with Cathy!

Mother, who is wealthy, says she will pay to have a room added to Cathy's paid-for house. But the building addition would block Cathy's mountain view.

And while Cathy recharges her batteries on solitude, Mother likes her bridge club to meet at her house, likes to babysit Cathy's sister's children, keeps three cats and a less-than-housebroken bulldog, plays LOUD tv soap operas all day; and smokes like a fiend.

Cathy, a devout Christian, wants to honor her Mother, but she does not want her peaceful life disrupted and destroyed. Cathy wants to relax in the sanctity of her own home. She loves her Mother, who is in her late 80s, but she loves Mother best at a slight distance.

Besides, Cathy, in her young 40s, has not given up on her dream of marriage someday. But as of now, she is the only single person among Mother's children.

Cathy's Mother does not get along with Cathy's brother's wife and even suggested that he divorce his wife so she could move in with him!



Not a chance!

Do you really want to force a grown man to choose between wife and mother?

“For this cause shall a man leave his father and his mother and cleave to his wife”

“John, what are my options? I feel trapped,” Cathy said.

We talked about buying a near-by house for Mother; various ways to enlarge Cathy's home without destroying the ambiance; assisted-living facilities; and about health, job and social issues. It's clear that if Mother moves in, Cathy would have to quit her job with its odd hours and stresses and income.

Several of my own six children have offered that when Ginny and I get too old, we can move in with them. So I understand Cathy's problem from the other side of the issue.

We Cowarts love each other now, but tightened together in a confined space forced by circumstances to be under each other's feet continually, daily, all the time, without remission? The Waltons, we ain't.

My grown children, God bless them, help us to live in our own home in every way they can. They check on our well-being, pay a yard man to do the heavy work in our garden, pay our phone bill, run errands, take us out to restaurants, help with medical stuff, and stand by to help in a thousand other ways at a mere phone call from me. (If I can get past those damn answering machines, an invention of the devil).

Ginny and I earnestly hope to die in our own home surrounded by our knickknacks, our garden, our birds, our books, our happy memories, our peace, our love—and, being hard-headed, we ain't moving no where!

And I'll bite the ankles of anybody who tried to drag us anyplace else.

I suggested that Cathy move slowly whatever she decides to do. By God's loving grace, Mother may die before her condo sells. That's what I pray for.

Is that wrong?

The Scripture speaks of certain people being old and full of days and gathered to their fathers. Sounds like a good plan to me. I picture us old folks as water balloons, filling up drop by drop, day by day, till we finally pop from fullness.

I pray for Cathy's mother, as well as for Ginny and for me, that we die joyfully with a minimum of pain, mess, and bother. But I know it does



not always happen that way. As Ginny told the doctor in the emergency room, “I’m not afraid of dieing but the process is a damn nuisance”.

So, before Cathy had to hurry back to the JIA for her flight out, I offered her one suggestion which I garnered from my reading of Scripture (see Mark 7:1-13):

“What you do is make a big donation to your church, then tell your Mother, 'It's *corban*—that is, what you might have deserved in care from me, I have offered to God instead. Let Him take care of you.

“Hey, Cathy, that's biblical,” I said.

I'm always glad to help young women with my deep insights as I apply Scripture to life's practical everyday problems.

Anybody out there have better suggestions?

Wednesday, February 6, 2013
A Roadtrip With My Son, Fred

Yesterday my eldest son, Fred, accompanied me on my regular drive to St. Mary's, Georgia, (a distance of about 90 miles round trip) to help me with my regular errands up there.

I wanted to make a quick trip of it because this was the longest I've left Ginny alone since her cardiac event.

My son is homeless and lives beneath a bridge in downtown Jacksonville.

Various mission shelters are available to him but he choses to sleep rough and just visit the homeless shelters for meals. He told me that he is gaining weight since he began this; mostly because of the starchy food served, he said.

When Fred attended grammar school, authorities tested him and he proved to score as a genius. He is not only smart, but street smart as well, and he seems to make his way fine among Jacksonville's homeless population. As an accomplished geek, Fred sets up computer systems for other homeless guys (the number of them who own laptops amazes me). He charges nothing for this service.

One reason Fred asked to go to Georgia with me was to check thrift stores in St. Mary's for a newer laptop of his own to use. I shopped those same places for a new sweatshirt and found one with the Stanton Blue Devils logo (Stanton College Prep is a school for Jacksonville's brightest students and several of my other children attended there).



Fred and I enjoyed a great visit together as we discovered microwaveable pork rinds, Elmer's chocolate candy, inexpensive gladiola bulbs, and a super-great buy on my pipe tobacco—Thanks Be To God!.

As I got to know my son better through our conversation during our road trip, I came to appreciate his life-style more. Oddly enough, I realize that were Ginny to kick me out, I'd also chose to live under a bridge rather than in some shelter.

As we joked and talked, I began to compare Fred in my mind with Nimrod, or Esau, or Samson, or John the Baptist—one of those Bible guys who lived an unconventional lifestyle misunderstood by most people, and who yet, realizing it or not, found God's hand upon them, like it or not.

Fred and I tentatively plan other excursions soon.

I'm glad of that.

It's a great relief for me to see him doing so well.

Thursday, February 7, 2013

Thank God I'm Well Enough To Grumble

The Meals On Wheels ministry of a local Presbyterian church proves a God-send for Ginny and me recently.

I hated to sign up for the program because I feel its service should go to folks in worse shape than we are.

But Ginny's illness and my stupid experience with the ham slices last week convinces me that we also need the help.

Ginny is so weak since her “cardiac event”. She loses energy fast with the slightest activity. Just filling the bird feeders with seeds exhausted her today. Walking to the frig to get herself a dish of yogurt drains her.

And yes, being a drama queen I do tend to exaggerate our plight but not by much.

Here's an unflattering snapshot I took of her yesterday when she napped too tired to even read:



She can not stand at the stove long enough to cook and even microzapping frozen food proves more than she can handle.

Although I can cook—I learned how in the Boy Scouts—I need a wood fire on the ground to really prepare a decent meal. Cook stoves defeat me. Yes, I do all I can around the house—which I feel is not enough. My own arthritis keeps me in pain if I walk or stand much.

Of course, I'm well enough to complain about feeling frustrated by my own weakness, ineptitude, and laziness. I've even taken to yelling back at the tv news. But in our prayer time Monday night Ginny read the Scripture: "Do all things without grumbling or questioning that you may be blameless..."

I didn't need to hear that.

Sometime Bible reading is a pain!

Anyhow, the care provided for us by the Meals On Wheels ministry proves a God-send. Their volunteers deliver a hot, well-balanced meal to our door each weekday. The driver delivers the food, asks about our well-being, and goes away.

No lingering lecture about how I ought to provide for my wife better.

Here is a snapshot I took of the meal they served us yesterday:



I think the best part is that somebody else decides the menu!

Gin and I have had too many conversations like, “What would you like for lunch”?

“I don't know. What would you like”?

“I don't know. What would you like”?

“Doesn't matter to me. What would you?”

Those conversations drive me nuts.

So it is a great blessing that somebody else decides what's for lunch. So, yesterday's lunch of fresh salad, chili-mac, peas, apple crisp, milk, and bread delighted me.

Of course having to ask for help from the Meals On Wheels ministry embarrasses me. The Lord Jesus does not seem overly concerned about providing for my pride. I'll bet He laughed the other day when the volunteer delivery driver turned out to be a member of a church we used to attend. I'd just as soon not have anyone there gloat over my present sorry state.

I want to be independent.

Damn it, I'm not too old and feeble to fix lunch.

I can fend for myself.

Like the oriental guy in this internet pix, I always have something in mind for lunch—Ramin noodles:



Wednesday, February 13, 2013

\$7.50

Yesterday I enjoyed driving my eldest son, Fred, who is homeless and lives under a bridge, around town shopping for a used laptop computer.

We found one to his liking and he spent his last penny to buy it. Fred told me his old computer broke and he needs this new one to run his unofficial computer consulting business which he operates from a park bench or a table in the public library.

Fred is smart and street-smart. He knows the ropes for surviving in the rough.

One funny thing: he'd spent his last penny on his new laptop and I only had a \$20 bill in my pocket. Fred told me that in Jacksonville, the cops can arrest you for vagrancy unless you can prove you have at least \$7.50 in your pocket.

Why \$7.50?

Some arcane law says seven dollars and fifty cents marks the line between a solid citizen and a bum. We joked that if the cops stopped us, we'd have to switch the \$20 bill back and forth between us to keep one of us from being arrested!

We returned to my house for him to charge his new computer's battery, to get a shower, and wash his laundry. Laundry proves a big problem



because everything Fred own, he carries on his back in several packs at all times; if he leaves things anywhere, they get stolen.

Ginny rested as Fred helped me rakes leaves on our garden path. As we raked I asked him if he were satisfied with his chosen lifestyle. Not very.

“Dad,” he said, “I played by all the rules and look where it got me”.

He said he's reconciled to life under the bridge with all his possessions on his back, because he's given up hope for much else.

He explained that he had worked the same job for over 30 years, owned a nice suburban home, drove a new Jeep—lost job, refinanced home and lost it to bank foreclosure, had his Jeep hijacked and stolen, hassled by police, lost touch with family and friends, ended up living under the bridge. He said that all this left him owing so much in taxes if he were to work a regular job, all his salary would be garnished by the IRS.

I explained that you play the cards you're dealt.

I've spent my whole life pissing against the wind, but not giving up hope. Salmon swim upstream with every ounce of energy, and if the bears don't catch them on the way up, they die and float back downstream tail first still facing their homeplace.

Besides, this world was not made to last forever.

Only people last forever.

This life is boot camp. We live in a war zone, in enemy-occupied territory. Home lies ahead. The hope of Heaven, the hope of resurrection, is our only hope. We will spend all eternity somewhere.

Pie in the sky by and by?

That's the only pie there is.

The man with the most toys when he dies, is still dead.

Jesus takes us from where we are, not from where we want to be, or even from where we ought to be, but from where we are right now.

I told Fred that if he wanted out from under the bridge, I could not promise anything for sure, but I'd try to rally family support to help him get stable and started again.

He said he'd think about it and let me know.

Our family support system was in place at one time, but Fred did not show up when he first said he would, and by the time he did arrive from up north months later, only giving us three day's notice, our money and energy had dissipated.



Fred's new computer system works fine. I enjoyed watching him set the thing up, installing programs and transferring files from his old system and as he chatted happily in computerese about Terrorbytes (which are bigger than bytes, kilobytes, megabytes or gigabytes) and such esoteric computer stuff.

Fred, who is from D.C., said that when a yankee senator learned there are over 5,000 cattle guards along highways in Texas, the senator demanded that some of them be laid off because the government did not need so many employees doing that job!

Thanks be to God, Ginny began feeling better in the afternoon, and as I faded, she brightened. For the first time in a week, she felt like leaving the house. We treated Fred to a late lunch at this Mexican place where Ginny was able to eat half a taco, the most she has been able to eat in ages.

We drove downtown and dropped Fred near his bridge and made sure he had the required \$7.50 to prove he is a solid citizen.

Good thing the cops did not stop me and check my pockets on the way home.

Back home, I found the mailman had delivered a refund check for some car repairs we'd had done last summer; it was for \$312.50. We are doing fine.

Valentine's Day, February 14, 2013

Gin's Health Update

Here is the text of an e-mail I've sent the family:

Hi Folks,

Ginny is OK.

Yesterday she passed out while folding laundry. Fortunately she fell across the bed so I did not have to try to get her up off the floor this time.

Recently she's felt lethargic and extremely weak. With no appetite she's lost 15+ pounds over the past month.

Her primary care doctor told me to call rescue for her and the paramedics transported her to the hospital again where the doctors suspect a mass on her liver or gall bladder. This evening they did a liver biopsy, but we will not learn the results till late tomorrow or Monday. Once they think they know what we may be dealing with, they will discuss treatment options with us.

Ginny reminded the physician that her living will is on file and she reiterated that she does not wish to undergo radiation, chemo, or such



like. If her condition proves life-threatening, she prefers hospice care in our own home. We are both comfortable with whatever the outcome of the situation.

Ginny jokes that she and I are in a neck-and-neck race to the finish line.

I asked if she would like to talk with a minister and she said that our faith is a daily thing and this is just another vicissitude along our way, not a special occasion. So she feels no need of a minister now. We rest content in the hand of the Lord Jesus same as every day.

She is in no pain at all and she glows with good spirit.

She laughed, "Honey, just think of all the money we're saving on our Viagra prescriptions"!

Ever the accountant, she spent much of our time together today teaching me how to pay bills on-line and how to work the tv remote—things she normally does.

Speaking of bills, when I left the hospital to run errands, at the bank the teller, a young woman I don't ever recall seeing before, asked, "Where is your wife? I always see the two of you together".

I told her that Gin is in the hospital.

The girl ask how long we've been married? Going on 45 years.

She told me her grandparents had been together 50 years and that she and her husband for 19 years.

Then she said, "You and your wife are the happiest people I've ever seen. I've never seen anyone as much in love as you two"!

That struck me as so odd. Gin and I are not aware of acting any different than anybody else. And it certainly never occurred to me that the bank teller would ever have any cause to notice us.

Anyhow, this was a nice stroke for Valentine's Day.

We are so thankful how all the kids (all six live within ten miles of us) have rallied to help us in every way possible and they stand ready to do whatever needed. At the moment there's not a thing we need.

Exciting, happy times! Whatever lies ahead for us.

So, bottom line: Gin is in the hospital for over the weekend at least. We've visited 19 doctors since November and they have still not decided what is bothering her.

As soon as we know more, I'll e-mail another update.

Please sustain us by your prayers.



Friday, February 15, 2013
Another Update On Ginny's Health

Ginny is still doing fine.

I just talked with the doc who did the procedure on her yesterday, and she talked with another doc herself.

It seems that her bile duct was blocked and they ran a pipecleaner through it so she feels much better today.

The doctors use the words "mass, tumour, obstruction, or blockage". They say the thingy may involve her liver, gaul blader, bile duct and kidneys. One says she may be a candidate for out-patient treatment with chemo but that radiation is not the treatment of choice. One nurse uses the term "cancer treatment". But the doctors shy away from saying words like cancer or guts.

One doc is ready to release her to out-patient stuff as soon as test results come back; maybe as early as tomorrow or Monday---depending, he said. But a department head must sign off before the mini-docs can do anything.

The pipecleaner worked magic on her and she, though jaundiced still, looks and acts 100% better this morning. Thank God for the skill of her doctors. This is not something I could have done for her at home.

In accord with current advanced medical technology, neither the phone nor the nurse call-button work in Ginny's room, so if you want to speak with her, use her cell phone number . For Gin to call a nurse, all she has to do is wiggle in bed to set off the fall-alert. Hospital maintenance guys are working to repair these glitches.

I told her the sure way to summon hospital personnel is to light a cigarette--security will be all over her in a flash!

I asked Gin how she feels about all this latest medical input. She said, "It's all just another damn nuisance". I'll keep you posted.

Friday, February 15, 2013
Note For The Kid In The Attic:

Today's, Google News reports:

More than 1,200 people were injured when a massive meteor broke apart above the Russian city of Chelyabinsk today, raining burning bits of rock over the city that shattered windows and caused a panic.



Debris from the meteor was found in three sites around the country, but emergency services say ground zero was Chebarkul Lake, just west of Chelyabinsk.

NASA estimated the meteor was the size of a bus and weighed an estimated 7,000 tons, it exploded with the force of 20 atomic bombs.

The meteorite rocketed into the atmosphere at 33,000 mph - or 10 miles per second - and shattered into pieces somewhere between 18-32 miles above the ground, the Russian Academy of Sciences said. As it streaked across the clear morning sky, the meteorite left a trail of white cloud that could be seen across large parts of central Russia.



Fragments of the meteorite crashed over a thinly populated area of the Chelyabinsk region, a factory heartland 900 miles east of Moscow near the border of Kazakhstan. Shock waves from the exploding space rock blew out windows in schools, offices and residential buildings in freezing cold temperatures, reported *RIA Novosti*, the Russian state news agency.

More than 1,200 people were injured when a massive meteor broke apart above the Russian city of Chelyabinsk today, raining burning bits of rock over the city that shattered windows and caused a panic.

"I'm very afraid," said Tamara Khabarova, a retiree from central Russia's Voronzeh region. "But what can we do? It's in God's hands."

The vapor trail and flash of the meteor was visible for over 300 miles and many photos were captured by cell phones and dashboard cameras in cars.



Tuesday, February 19, 2013
Coward-worthy Friends, Family, and Jokes

Since I brought Ginny home from the hospital, family and friends swarmed into our home to offer help, comfort, advice, and laughter.

Sunday, Donald & Helen, Jennifer & Terri, Rex, and Wes visited.

Monday, Wes, and Johnny, and Donald & Helen, and Eve paid their respects.

Well, respect may not be the right word.

Eve brought a Mohawk haircut hat for me to try on while the others mocked:



Various ones brought in gifts of food, coffee, cash, books and perfume. They performed all sorts of errands: raking leaves, washing dishes, shopping, running errands, giving medical information, repairing my wheelbarrow, fixing our radio—and they stand ready to do many other such hands-on helps while at the same time respecting our need for privacy.



I am thankful for all the support shown.

Ginny and I are greatly loved.

I'm not exactly sure why. We're just us.

Between bouts of outrageous laughter when I almost fell in the floor twice as “respectful” children moved chairs I was leaning on, we discussed serious matters. In his prayer for us, Wes mentioned that every one of us stands at some turning point in life--health, jobs, future plans, housing, care for elderly parents (Ginny & I are not the only ones), decisions, commitments, etc. Wes prayed that at our various turning points, we turn more and more into the arms of Jesus.

I mentioned that since Ginny's attack, I have hardly given a thought to God or even religion.

All concluded that as Christians who live day by day in the presence of God, He becomes so foundational that times of special crisis differ little from “normal” times. Since our faith is not of a Sunday-Go-To-Meeting variety, but an everyday lifestyle, then the Lord forms almost a white noise in the background, no matter what else is going on.

As Saint Paul wrote, “That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death; If by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead”.

Life is all about resurrection—His, and eventually, ours.

Nothing else counts for much....

Except maybe jokes.

Mark, Eve's husband, sent me two jokes which he terms “Cowart-worthy”. May his name be forever linked with these two on the Internet:

What do you call fake spaghetti?

An Impasta.

What do you call an alligator in a red vest?

An Investigator.

Wednesday, February 20, 2013

Dealing With Shit

Yesterday, more people who care about us visited. Dale and Earl brought us lunch; Carol offered to grocery shop for us. Patricia, our youngest daughter, came bringing Ginny flowers and a chicken dinner.



Helen, during Monday's confusion of visitors, sat by our aquarium drawing one of Ginny's golden fantails; she e-mailed her drawing to me and I'm using it as my desktop background:



Beautiful things and beautiful people surround us during Ginny's illness. All offer their aid as future need arises.

That's nice.

But some personal things, we feel we need to do ourselves.

For instance, rolls of bellyfat and arthritis pains prevent me from reaching my toes. For ages, when needed, Ginny has taken my feet into her lap and, because my toenails are so thick, she used wire cutters from my toolbox to clip them for me.

We laugh that when we married, we vowed for better or for worse and worse and worse. Such things make up love.

Ginny had an accident before making it to the bathroom.

Poor Dear, too weak to clean it up herself, felt embarrassed.

I said that sex and kissing are not the only biological elements involved in marriage. And what happened to her is just common, everyday biology.

In Stephen King's great novel *Dolores Claiborne*, the heroine observes, "Shit washes off".



And, In First Century Jerusalem, the camels and donkeys walking the streets lacked emission control devices. When the disciples walked those streets, they picked up a certain residue between the toes of their open sandals.

The night before He was crucified for us, the Lord of Glory wrapped a towel around His waist, knelt on the floor, and washed the disciples' feet—not in some quaint religious ritual—but because their feet were dirty.

Is a servant any better than his Lord?

So I cleaned up—although I must admit it presented a comic spectacle of me crawling on hands and knees, then, too arthritic to stand, trying to hoist myself up on bathroom fixtures. I got to laughing at the thought that one slip of my hand would land me head-first in the toilet, my legs kicking in the air.

Afterwards I told Ginny, “Next year, if I want to show I love you, I'll just buy a Valentine's card”.

Friday, February 22, 2013

A Potato Salad Incident and A Serious Reason

Years ago, tv personality Art Linkletter wrote a book titled *Old Age Is Not For Sissies*. Ginny and I refer to that a lot recently.

For instance, the other day our youngest daughter left us a roast chicken and a tub of potato salad for our supper. During Ginny's illness people have brought food; our refrigerator runneth over.

Thing is, clear shrink-wrap sealed the potato salad in its tub.

I could not see the clear plastic to get the dish open. I called Ginny into the kitchen.

She could see the edge of the cellophane, but when she pinched it to pull, she did not have the strength to open the package.

In mock panic, I cried, “We're gonna starve! We're gonna starve! With all this food around us, we're gonna starve”.

We fell into eachother's arms laughing at our plight, and Ginny said, “Old age is not for sissies”. Then my resourceful wife, pulled a sharp knife out of the drawer and cut the wrap away.

The potato salad was delicious.

Now, I'd like to ponder a reason about why Ginny and I feel so confident as we face potentially dangerous diseases. Why we are confident about the future. Believe me, it's not arrogance.



We are no better than anyone else. We are not good people, just people. Not above anyone, just common, ordinary, garden-variety Christians.

Yet we feel confident of Heaven ahead for two reasons: Easter and Christmas.

We believe Jesus is inclined to take in strays; and we believe in the resurrection of the dead and the life ever after.

The historical fact that Jesus rose from the dead shows that He has the power to raise us also. That's Easter.

That He's inclined to take in strays is shown in the fact that He came to this earth in the first place. That's Christmas when He came to seek and to save the lost

Jesus once said, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life".

He added, "The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live. For as the Father hath life in himself; so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself...

"The hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear His voice, And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation".

Yes, everyone of us will spend all eternity somewhere.

Writing to the Romans, St. Paul said that Jesus is, "declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead".

So death could not put down the Prince of Life. He is more powerful. And yet He died for us because... we are too weak to live for ourselves.

All we like sheep have gone astray, No doubt about that. But the good Lord is inclined to take in strays.

The Bible says, "For when we were yet without strength (*can't even open potato salad*) in due time Christ died for the ungodly... But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us".

Old age may not be for sissies, but His strength is made perfect in our weakness. We may now be as weak as new-born babes, but like those



little creatures, we have a future to grow into, after our birth, and after our death, a life lies ahead.

A heavenly life.

A full, beautiful life.

A life without plastic wrap.

Saturday, February 23, 2013

A Bolt From The Blue

I spent the whole day fighting a bolt, a rusty bolt with the head corroded off. Bolt cutters would not work in the tight space. Vice grips, the same. Hacksaw broke...

I love to do mechanical things....I lie.

Anyhow, the highpoint of my day came when Dr. Downey, our primary care physician, called me at home to check on Ginny.

Never before in my life has a doctor called me. His call came as a bolt from the blue.

He gave me advice that will make her care much easier for me. And not only that, but he asked my permission, then prayed for us over the phone. That impressed me.

Even more impressive was the fact that he gave me instructions on how to bypass the office phone-tree to reach him any hour should need arise. I've never heard of a physician doing that before.

This event is another indication of how many people love us and are concerned with our well being. And all these folk remind me continually of God's love even when in a world where cancer and stubborn rusty bolts try to prevail.

Monday, February 25, 2013

A Roach & Tales of Two Rings

While Ginny was in the hospital, I let someone else wash clothes at our house.

Yesterday Ginny felt well enough to supervise my washing our own things, a task I had not done for weeks. As I loaded the washing machine, Ginny checked the dryer lint trap.

“John,” she said, “Why is there a roach in my dryer”?

“Well, Honey,” I said, “He was wet”.



In other household news, our middle daughter Eve came over to run errands for us—trip to the bank, grocery shopping, library.

Eve and her husband, Mark, celebrated their fifth anniversary this month. Eve showed off a silver puzzle ring he gave her. Four interlocking rings blend together into one ring forming an intricate Celtic love knot.

Last week, my already high opinion of Mark increased when he phoned me about Ginny's health.

His wife is the delicate, sensitive, tender-hearted one among our three daughters and three sons. How she managed to survive the merciless teasing in this family, I don't know. Yet, she survived, won a scholarship, studied in London, and earned her master's degree while maintaining her gentle spirit.

Some news about Ginny's health can upset her.

Mark phoned asking that I relay news through him, instead of sending blanket e-mails, so that he can comfort Eve whenever she needs it.

Wow. What a man! I told Eve that he is a treasure. I admire him. That's just the sort of thing I'd want to do myself.

But, speaking of rings...

Last Friday, in Kansas City, Missouri, a young woman named Sarah Darling, washed her hands and dropped her diamond engagement ring in her purse.

That afternoon, she passed a homeless man, Billy Ray Harris, who often sleeps under a bridge. He was begging on the street. Ms Darling, scooped change from her purse, dropped it in his collection cup, and walked on.

That night when Mr. Harris counted his day's take, he discovered the valuable diamond ring. He set it aside.

Saturday, heart-sick on realizing her ring was gone, Ms Darling searched for Harris, but could not find him.

Sunday, Mr. Harris begged again on the same corner and she did find him.

Ms Darling said, "I asked him ... I don't know if you remember me, but I think I gave you something that's very precious to me," and he says, "Was it a ring? I have it, I kept it for you."

The homeless beggar returned the ring to the lady.



Ms Darling said she is grateful Harris was so honest as many others might have pawned the ring or sold it.

“I actually feel I'm especially lucky to have this ring now,” she said. “I loved it before. I loved it so much, but I love it so much more now. I feel like it has such great karma”.

In their excitement Ms Darling and her fiancé contacted various news media with their story. They also set up a fund-raising web page requesting rewards for Harris. By this morning, 4,000 people world-wide have pledged over \$100,000 for the honest beggar.

‘I like all the attention,’ Mr. Harris said, ‘But I don't think I deserve it. ‘What has the world come to when a person who returns something that doesn't belong to him, and all this happens?’”

Thursday, February 28, 2013
Return Of The Musk Ox Herd

On June 14, 2009, I wrote about how a musk ox herd circles to protect a weak member; I wrote about this in connection with my friend Barbara White's death. It is an essay about Christian love.

Those musk oxen have returned.



I can't remember when it was, but I've also written about the rug in our foyer; it used to be a tapestry hanging on the wall of a Greyhound bus station. To us it represents the number of people who pass through our little home on this blind cull-de-sac.

For instance yesterday as I brought Ginny home from her preadmission interview at the hospital, our neighbors Phil, Sherri, Debbie and Holly came to see me about two abandoned dogs which some creep had chained to a tree in the ditch last week. The dogs, without food, water or shelter in the recent storms, bark incessantly. But everyone feared to even try to give them water because these pitbulls lunge and snarl so aggressively fierce.

Even though I have never seen these dogs, folks wanted me to contact the humane society to have them picked up and cared for. I called (reference # 2013-58005) and the society picked the vicious dogs up this morning.

Being in a spot of difficulty yourself gives a Christian no excuse for not helping neighbors.

While I got Ginny settled back into bed, people began showing up at my door to help her, and me:

Terri and Brandon did some yard work in preparation for renting a nearby house do be near at hand as we need them and Jennifer. In the Storm



this week strong wind blew down a log (as big around as a dinner plate) on our roof, and strong, young Brandon lifted it and carried it away for me.

My friend Rex is repairing electric and plumbing in that house so they can move in soon.

Three registered nurses yesterday gave me and Gin medical tips.

The Meals-On-Wheels driver, whose name I don't even know, came to check on us.

Eve is bringing Ginny library books tonight.

Donald and Helen have brought in Chinese food and are getting an electric razor to keep me from looking so shaggy.

Fred, who lives homeless under a bridge, called setting up a date when he can do some Spring planting in our flower beds.

Carol, even though she can hardly walk herself, went grocery shopping for me to buy some things I forgot last time I went.

See what I mean about the musk oxen circling to protect us in a time of trouble?

My old friend Randy, though he is tending his 92-year-old mother, brought flowers to Ginny, and comfort to me. We talked about the Lord's love as manifested in His people. And Randy reminded me of quotes from C.S. Lewis.

That proved helpful because last night Ginny felt too poorly to even sit up and watch tv. So we cozied down under the covers, she snuggled her head on my shoulder, and I read the first two chapters of Lewis' *The Magician's Nephew*, my favorite of the Narnia books, to her as she fell asleep again.

My computer desktop background today is a photo captioned *Ginny Comes Out On Top*. One vacation, I snapped this photo of her smile as she triumphantly reached the top of the St. Simons Island Lighthouse after climbing 129 narrow cast-iron steps circling up 104 feet to top of the tower.

It's another good day.



Monday, March 4, 2013
Kindness Overwhelming

The kindness of friends, neighbors and family overwhelms me as I care for Ginny in her current illness.

All these folks constantly remind me of the overarching love of God, Who is the Help of the helpless, and a very present Help in time of trouble.

In years past, I once worked loading steel boxcars in Florida's August sun when to touch the sides of the railroad car raised blisters; but I find caregiving harder work than that.

Thank God He sends so many people to help me!

Recently, I talked with the wealthiest man I know. He also suffers medical problems but, without close family, he has to hire his 24-hour caregivers. He said that one of them stole his credit card and charged gas for her car and items for herself.

I feel better off than he is.

Yesterday, Johnny, Jennifer, Donald and Terri called to check if we need anything. Eve came by bring books, videos, and barbecue.

Carol is lending me a wheelchair to take Ginny to her next doctor's appointment.



And... And my friend Rex owns a vacant house near where we live. He spent 12 hours yesterday repairing electric wiring and plumbing.

Gin and I celebrated the Thanksgiving Feast with his family in 2011 out in the woods where they live.

At that time, I snapped this snapshot of him then, and I wrote a diary entry about how Rex is one man I admire:



Rex, a licensed building contractor, is repairing his vacant house and has offered to let my daughter Jennifer and her family live there rent-free for up to a year so they can be near at hand to aid me and Ginny whenever we need them.

That's typical of him.

Once in a massive thunderstorm Ginny ran the car off the road puncturing two front tires. Without hesitation, Rex went out in the storm, changed the old tires in knee-deep water. Then he went to an open auto shop and bought, at his own expense, two new tires for our car and put them on the rims himself.

Again and again he's done that same sort of thing for many other people.

Funny thing, Rex and I seldom talk religion but when we do, we often disagree. Yet, he reminds me of that Scripture saying, By this shall all men know ye are my disciples, that ye love one another.

Thanks be to God.

Wednesday, March 6, 2013

One For A Man, Two For A Horse

Flowers festoon our home.

So many kind folks have given Ginny flowers that she said our home looks like we're preparing for a lavish wedding!

Yes, we are loved. But we are also prey.

Many unscrupulous business and individuals target old people intent on scamming money.

Late night tv bombards us with cancer supplements guaranteed to render traditional cancer treatments more effective. These ads are followed by



sure-fire baldness creams. And pills that swear to work where Viagra fails...

By the way, did you hear about the kid who thought Viagra was a medicine for sick dinosaurs?

He told his dad that Viagra was a cure for a reptile's dysfunction!

Daily, our mail brings offers for us to buy scooters for mobility, child-free time-share condos, and burial plots. We even got an offer for a discount on cremation if we sign up before Thursday (If I don't die by Thursday, do I lose my discount?)

Lawyers want to help us enhance our social security payments. Credit card companies generously offer us cards at only 33% interest. Reverse mortgage folks want to latch onto our home. I can get free samples of baby diapers for adults. And medical nostrums promise to cure bed wetting, tuberculosis, AIDS, and earache.

Reminds me of an 1890s ad I saw in an old newspaper selling cure-all pills for humans and animals alike with the instructions: One For A Man, Two For A Horse!

Yes, a lot of creeps want to prey on the elderly.

But an e-mail I received yesterday takes the prize.

I do not know how this person got my e-mail address but she knew my wife is ill and offered her condolences and help should I wish to contact the spirit world for aid.

She said she herself is, "is a highly evolved nonphysical entity".

She channels a female spirit which she says is the only true full body, open, deep trance spirit medium in the world. The e-mail says this spirit medium "gives up her conscious physical life to allow others to come through with messages and consultations".

I can't help wondering if this is a deliberate fraud after money, a deluded person, or a person in thrall to a demon.

At any rate, this person apparently contacts people facing serious illness and claims to give the desperate a glimmer of hope in the midst of their troubles.

The medium claims power to solve any problem I might have.

One for a man, two for a horse.



Thursday, March 7, 2013

Another Great Day In Our Bus Station

About fifteen years ago as I walked past a closing business, I spotted a tapestry the workers were throwing out into a dumpster.

The business that was closing was a bus sub-station.

The tapestry featured the famous Greyhound Bus Company logo woven in heavy carpeting material.

I spoke with the site manager and he gave me permission to take the heavy wall-hanging home with me. At the time, we did not own a car so I balanced the awkward rug between the seat and handlebars of a bicycle and walked the thing a mile home.

The Greyhound rug delighted Ginny.

We often joked that so many people pass through our house that it's like living in a bus station.

We placed the colorful rug in our entrance foyer to greet visitors.



The number of folks who visit amazes me. Essentially we are quiet, shy people who live to ourselves, read, write, love, pitter in our garden, and don't bother anybody. Our home lays in a cul-de-sac off the beaten path where I work on my manuscripts absolutely alone.



Sometimes.

Then, there are days like yesterday when Ginny said our Greyhound rug seems symbolically appropriate:

So many people who care about us came to call—including two nurses, five of our children, and a kid looking for his lost pet raccoon.

Ginny also visited two physicians and made momentous decisions about her impending death from bile duct cancer; these will blend for her comfort and my sanity.

As Dr. Downey, a physician who has cared for us for the past 15 years, as he left the consulting room after he prayed for us, he paused at the door, turned, and said, “I love you”.

All these people we have seen, who called in our home, or the scads who have phoned today remind me so much of God's love for us even when things get super crappy here in the Cowart bus station.

At one point, someone in our living room (I won't divulge who) let out a loud fart.

I said, “Ginny, the doctors are all wrong. You are not sick. We are under attack by Orcs. Mr. Frodo has not made it to Mordor with the ring. I just heard an Orc battle trumpet”.

While everyone else laughed hysterically, Ginny turned and gave me THAT LOOK—you long-married guys know the one I mean.

I said, “Honey, it is my mission in life to spread light and joy wherever I go”.

“Yes, Love,” she said, “But you spread it on too thick”.

Friday, March 8, 2013
Voices From Years Ago

Yesterday, I stood outside in our driveway smoking my pipe because my pipe smoke bothered the visiting nurse in our living room. I often do that when non-smokers visit.

A truck driver had just delivered a new wheelchair.

I heard our daughter-in-love, Helen, who was also visiting, yell, “Donald, Stop That”!

I broke up laughing so hard I could hardly stand. I knew what had to be happening inside my house. I knew that my son Donald, who has always loved to fiddle with things, must have assembled, took apart, and reassembled Ginny's new wheelchair.



I was right.

When I back came inside, Donald was pushing a Ginny, who was howling with laughter, at top speed all around the house making sure the contraption would fit through narrow doors—all much to his poor, civilized wife's exasperation.

She married into madness.

Illness is such a serious business at our house.

The phone rang.

I answered and a voice I have not heard in over 25 years spoke—a relative from my mother's huge extended family wanted to gossip about my current situation.

I froze.

Resentment welled up inside me.

Old wounds opened.

I tasted bile.

Bitterness I thought I'd forgotten came upon me as fresh as the day I felt the clan had did me dirt (old Florida Cracker expression)

For anyone interested in sordid details, I wrote about this same thing back on May 10, 2009 in my blog archives at <http://www.cowart.info/blog/?p=1098>.

But yesterday, I wondered why this person had called me again after all this time?

I did not know how to handle this call.

I settled on answering her questions and comments with the same cold Christian courtesy as I would use with any stranger met at a bus stop.

I spoke with no ill-will, no animosity, no bitterness—but no warmth. Non-committal words which conveyed as little information as possible. She wanted my private phone number so she could call me again.

Not a chance!

I said goodbye and hung up the phone, surprised that I had reacted so. I thought I had forgiven, forgotten, moved on.

Apparently, I hadn't.

For me, some sin is punctilliar—it happens in a flash, spur-of-the-moment temptation, like cursing another driver or stealing money left on the store counter.



Other sin festers inside me, seething beneath the surface for years and years, cherished in my bosom and nurtured quietly in the dark recesses of my soul.

And just when I'm happy and righteous and feeling like a good guy, the boil erupts ancient pus. And I see once again that I am a sinner and that prayer, "Forgive me my trespasses as I forgive those who have trespassed against me" has meaning.

Christ died for our petty, nasty, internal sins too...

Later in the evening, alone, in love, thankful, happy, talking about how to wind things up, business matters, family news, and our Scrapple word game, I mentioned my short-comings and disappointment in myself as a Christian to Ginny.

I want to be a loving man but I find it beyond me.

Why would a different caller today ask me, "What do you plan to do after this"?

"I intend to keep enjoying my time with my wife".

"I mean what do you plan to do after she dies? Will you marry again"?

"Well, I've narrowed my list of candidates for my next wife, down to eight women but I haven't picked any of the finalists yet," I said.

I asked Ginny, "As a Christian, how can I stand to put up with people like that"?

"Love," she said, "If you can stand God, you can stand anybody".

Saturday, March 9, 2013

My Bitter, Resentful, Withdrawal

This may be a post for you to skip reading.

I've been up all night worrying, and I may feel different tomorrow. In fact, God willing, tomorrow I intend to write about birds Ginny and I have seen. I enjoyed telling my daughter Eve about some of them today when she came over to clean house for me before the government maids invade. I've never had a maid in the house before and I don't want the maids thinking an utter filthy slob lives here in squalor.

So, skip this bitter post and read about the little birdies tomorrow.

This morning for some reason I felt inclined to research Google entries on the subject "House Arrest".

Maybe I have the wrong idea about the subject.

But I don't think so.



Yesterday, my son John suggested that I wear an electronic monitor.

That idea made me think of poor old Corrado Soprano in the tv series. The FBI made him wear one of those things.

I don't think Johnny ever watched *The Sopranos*; so how was he to know how I'd view such a thing?

According to my superficial Internet browsing, "Typically, the person under house arrest does not have access to any means of communication. If electronic communication is allowed, conversations will be monitored. The conversations of criminals can be directly monitored via the unit itself...."

I'll bet that puts a damper on blogging.

The Internet tells me, "Offenders may be allowed to leave their homes for specific, predetermined purposes; for instance visits to a probation officer or police station.

"An electronic sensor is locked to the offender's ankle (technically called an ankle monitor, sometimes referred to as a tether). The electronic sensor transmits a GPS signal to base and the base handset is connected to a police monitoring service.

"If the subject ventures too far from home, his violation is recorded and the proper authorities are summoned".

My son John suggested that I wear such a devise around my neck on a chain so that if I cause trouble the proper authorities can come get me....

No. No. No... I've got that wrong.

Johnny said that if I get into trouble the proper authorities can come haul me off.

No. That's still not right either.

Johnny said that for my own safety, like if I were to fall on the floor, my tether alarm would beep and firemen would crash through our front door and stand around laughing their asses off at me naked on the floor wiggling trying to stand up.

No, that's not what my son said either. That's what I pictured in my twisted mind when Johnny offered to buy me a medic alert necklace so I could call for aid anywhere I am without having to even reach for a telephone.

In my mind, it's that same Homeland Security problem on a personal level—restricting freedom in the name of safety.

I hope I did not offend him, (I've been doing a lot of offending people recently) but I balked at Johnny's loving concern.



But on reflection, maybe he's right and I should accept his gift. I was reacting emotionally, not thinking reasonably, as we talked.

I feel my life, actions, communications, words, intentions, and trips to the bathroom are already restricted and monitored too damn closely.

Who needs an electronic sensor to report when I cause trouble?

I have people who do that already.

I felt that two of them jumped onto me with all four feet about my driving my own car yesterday when a social worker and a host of friends, neighbors, and relatives came through the house to visit (inspect) our home.

Criticisms thrown at me yesterday include:

Apparently I do not keep our bathroom clean enough to pass inspection.

And I don't wash the dishes properly.

And I have not written down burial plans.

And I answer my own telephone wrong.

And I write the wrong things and talk to the wrong people.

And I'm not to climb on the roof of my own home to blow off the leaves because I might screw something up—even though I've done that myself for years.

And when I want to do some task myself, one visitor accused me of “robbing my children of their blessing”.

That's me, a blessing stealer.

Lord, I'm so sick of needing help!

In my present state of mind, Hell will drip icicles before I ever again ask anyone anywhere for anykind of aid!

For 73 years I have made bricks without straw and that's a hard habit to break.

Much of my life I've felt I was treading in deep water with eight or ten people and God Himself standing on my shoulders.

Screw home security.

One visiting critic noted that I have made inadequate hurricane preparations to protect Ginny in a storm.

In fact, I feel as though some of these folks are setting the stage to remove her from my care and lock her away from me in a nursing home.

That's my greatest fear in life.

And that may have to come.



This is all about Ginny and when she and I determine that I am incompetent to care for her, then I will help her go into residential care.

Even that. This is not about me. What's best for Ginny matters most.

So, I am, a Christian wimp, sitting here weeping and writing in my diary at 4 in the morning, and kicking myself because I must sleep and be alert for the next wave.

This is the first time I have cried since this whole illness thing came upon us.

But even when I think about, much less voice or write about such things, I come across as an ungrateful bastard who does not appreciate the kindness loving people offer.

But I do try to exercise loving common sense, however uncomfortable, anguished, and painful it may be.

After dawn comes, I'll call Johnny—he is wiser than I am—and I'll thank him and ask him to look into getting that chain for me to wear around my neck....

And, for my diary entry tomorrow, I think we'll cover the mating habits of the common house wren.

Sunday, March 10, 2013 Prophetic Bookends,

Yesterday, I nailed old shoes, toe pointed down, to a tree in our backyard.

No, this is not some weird religious ritual.

Ginny wanted me to nail up old shoes to make nesting sites for the house wrens that frequent our garden; wrens love to nest in deep recesses.

Last year a pair laid eggs in a nest they'd built in Ginny's teapot windchime. And she wanted to offer the little birds more sites this Spring.

For the first time in many weeks, Ginny felt well enough to sit in our backyard enjoying birds and flowers.

Friday, Johnny had brought in 20 pounds of birdseed and Eve filled the five feeders, so birds flocked to our yard again.

Gin and I relished discussing whether one was a russet sparrow or a peedee—that's what constitutes argument in our marriage. (She's wrong! It was a russet sparrow).



Earlier that morning I injected her insulin medicine, then, turn about, she administered my eye-drops.

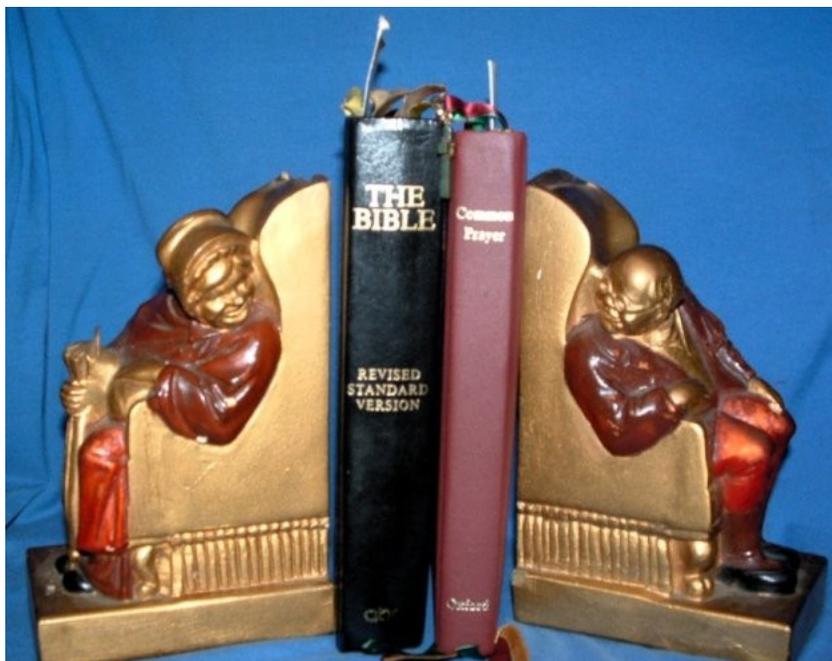
A pathetic team but we take care of eachother.

About 35 years ago, I bought Ginny a pair of bookends at a Salvation Army thrift shop.

She thought they were funny because they depicted our marriage with us as an an old couple in our dotage.

And, though I'm not bald yet, here years later those bookends do look like us.

Here's a photo of them holding our Bible and Prayer Book with the scrap paper book marks from our daily evening devotions:



We piddled in the backyard more than we should have and became overtired. I helped her back into the house for lunch. I prepared an avocado stuffed with cottage cheese and taboli, tomato and dill pickle slices, served with a scoop of chicken salad. Gin was able to eat most of it, most solid food she's been able to keep down in weeks.

After lunch we sat happily in our two rocking chairs smoking and discussing options for her burial. We haven't settled on one way yet but we're leaning toward either cremation or burial in Evergreen Cemetery



An e-mail from one of her brothers asked why she mentions six children when he thought we only had four. She replied that she feels mother toward the two from my first marriage as much as her four natural births.

Our eyes teared up as we talked about how proud we are with our children, how well they have turned out, and how much they please us.

We talked about how much we've enjoyed our marriage and family but how nice it is to have a day without visitors after all the boil of the hospice intake process.

Ginny told me that her exhaustion brings her many thoughts and dreams.

She said a recurring phrase in her mind came from a book by Corrie Ten Boon about how you do not get grace to face death in advance. "You don't pick up your ticket till you get to the train station," she said.

Ginny dreamed she was in a car with someone else driving her somewhere she did not want to go, but she could not get out of the moving car.

She dreamed about walking through a flower garden, not our own backyard, but a garden lush with flowers and the air filled with swarms of hummingbirds.

She dreamed about walking in downtown Jacksonville with old buildings crumbling all around her but she could not find her way out

She said, "I dreamed about my cancer. I was a tree and the cancer was a vine growing up it and choking the life out of it. But the vine had no evil intent. It did not even know it was killing the tree. It was just doing its natural thing without malice".

We laughed at the confusion the other day when the social worker asked about our hurricane plans. When the lady asked, both Ginny and I assumed she wanted to know if we would serve on a rescue team. Ginny said, "We've had CERT(Civilian Emergency Rescue Team) training, but this time the neighbors will have to fend for themselves".

I said words to the same effect, that with my arthritis, I could no longer lift disaster victims.

Ginny and I were thinking along the same line when the lady explained that she wanted to know if we would need to be evacuated to a medical emergency shelter in a storm!

We never thought along those lines.

We've always assumed we'd be part of a rescue effort. And even when the lady explained she was talking about us going to a shelter, we balked



because although we trained as Red Cross shelter managers years ago, we would never think of going into a shelter ourselves.

It was so funny to be talking at cross purposes with that social worker and not realizing that we were doing that!

How silly of us.

We laughed at funny memories and private phrases from the years before we even had children—*Shut Up and Trust Me Implicitly!...Sand Cave...Middle of the daddy longlegs... All the thoughts of a turtle are turtle... I love you forever but I can't stand you right this minute!..Tomorrow is also a day.*

I do hope that in all the pre-death activities, each one of the kids takes an hour to just sit quiet and talk with Ginny. I doubt if any of us, me included, realize what a smart, wise, deep, and charitable person she is.

We also talked about doctors, Easter, taxes, and the Muppet videos, and about the time when Johnny Carson interviewed Kermit the Frog on the *Tonight Show*.

As we grew tired of talking, bookends in our chairs, Ginny said, “John, an odd song keeps running through my brain and I can't shake it. Don't know if I want to”.

The song dwelling in her mind proved to be the World War II signature battle song of the United States Army Air Corps. So Ginny and I sang it together:

Off We Go Into The Wild Blue Yonder,
Flying high Into The sun!

I doubt this song was originally written as a thanksgiving hymn, but when Ginny and I sang it together, it became one.

Monday, March 11, 2013
Life As Sharks Circle

Ginny yelled at me today; and I yelled back at her. This sort of behavior is unheard of for us, but things got a little tense.

She felt poorly and fell asleep shortly before her shot was due; I chose to delay giving it, then after an hour, I forgot about the shot altogether. And while she napped, I made phone calls related to her care—14 phone calls.

About ten of those phone calls involved going through the options in some doctors' mechanical phone tree (phone trees invented by satan himself) Phone trees with messages like this:



Your call is important to us so listen carefully to options on the following menu. You have reached doctor Frankenstein's answering machine, designed to screen out riff-raft. If you are riff, press one. If you are raft, press two. All others hang up now.

Since Gin's been concerned about her cigarette supply, my first call was to the shop where I always buy her brand. I told the lady, I was sending my son to pick them up this month and asked if she would take my personal check.

She explained that store policy dictated that she accept no checks, but she'd ask the owner, "That Carlton 120 guy wants to know if you'll take a personal check," she called.

"Oh, him," the owner shouted back, "Sure I'll take his check. No problem".

When you are young, you make your reputation; when you are old, your reputation makes you.

Anyhow, after I battled the dozen or so other phone calls—a task that exhausted me—Gin woke up and yelled at me for throwing her schedule off by delaying her insulin shot, and I yelled back that I'd been busy taking care of her medical business!

Then she realized she was yelling because she'd forgotten to put in her hearing aids and did not realize how loud she was; and I realized that I was yelling in reaction to phone frustration, so we kissed and made up.

Giving her the delayed shot, I prayed the Care-giver's Prayer:

Lord, don't let me fuck things up too bad today

Later, as Ginny recorded entries in her medical log, she asked me how to spell the medical name for one of her many new prescriptions.

I picked up the bottle, moved into better light, squinted at the label, and spelled—P.I.L.L.

Good thing she loves me.

One thing that disturbs us is the manifold changes in our normal schedules and routines. We tend to be methodical people and disruptions throw us off balance. For instance, in normal times, with her business acumen Ginny would have handled all the calls to doctors' offices, pharmacies, insurance companies, and such. Such tasks now fall on me and it bothers both of us that I'm dealing with fax transfers of medical records, appointment scheduling, etc.

I'm out of my depth and it frustrates Ginny to see me flounder in such matters. Although, thank God, last week she aligned financial matters



such as our property taxes, storm water fees, and credit card accounts so I don't have to think about those matters after she dies. She set it all up for another year or so in advance to save me from those worries.

We do take care of each other as best we can.

Another factor bothering us is an element of fear.

Yes, Christians also fear death—not the final outcome, but the process. Jesus did not skip around the Garden of Gethsemane. He sweated blood and wanted to avoid “this cup”, so who can blame us for being on edge about death's preliminaries?

Our present state reminds me of Daddy Shark and his son swimming in the ocean.

They chanced upon a group of swimmers treading water in a cluster.

Junior said, “Dad, let's eat them”.

“Not yet”, said Daddy Shark, “First we swim in a circle around them three times with just half our fins above water”.

They circled the swimmers.

“Can we eat them now,” Junior asked.

“Not yet,” Daddy said. “Now, we'll swim around them with all our dorsal fins above water, then we'll eat them”.

“Why do we do that”?

“They taste so much better if you scare all the shit out of them first”.

Friday, March 15, 2013

Foreshadowing

Neither Ginny nor I can remember when we first met. Ours was not love at first sight because we can't remember that first sight. Both part of a young people's group, we gradually became aware of each other's existence.

I've kept a more-or-less daily diary since I was a Boy Scout. Most of my early diaries have been lost over time, but were you to check out my postings from the late 1960s, you'd find no mention of Ginny. Back then I did not realize she would be significant in my life for the next 44 years; she was just another girl in the crowd.

Shows how much I know about things!

Yes, even keeping a daily record does not help much when it comes to making my life make sense.



I don't know what's going on in my own life, much less anybody else's.

And my diary record certainly proves that I have no idea what God is doing. However, I think I can see a certain foreshadowing of certain events.

(And yes, I'm certain I used the word *certain* three times in that last sentence).

Thinking about God's foreshadowing gives me a certain amount of confidence about what may be really going on when my life turns crappy.

Yesterday, four ladies from the office where Ginny used to work, having heard about her terminal cancer, came by to visit her. That made her so happy! I went outside to smoke my pipe and left the five of them to hen talk and I could hear joyous laughter ringing from our living room.

That made me remember how happy Ginny was in her work, and about her retirement last June, and about the preparations she made for that retirement even though at the time she had no inkling that the cancer may have already been growing inside her.

Prior to her retirement, Ginny made sure the car was paid off. She arranged for dental work before full insurance ran out. She straightened out savings and credit cards and planed a budget to carry us through retirement.... none of our plans foresaw cancer.

But God's did.

For instance, when Ginny retired, the government, for God only knows what reason, kept back over a third of her anticipated pension money... That unexpected withholding threw our budget out of whack.

I had to apply for Food Stamps only to find that we earn \$30 a year too much to qualify!

In the transition time till we got finances adjusted, I had to stand in the bread line at a local church's food pantry or else we would have no food in the house.

I raged at the injustice, indignity, and inconvenience; we'd planed to spend money on a vacation trip which we had to cancel. We wanted to buy a new chair, a pump, maybe even living room carpet...

We planed to spend her retirement money on all sorts of goodies...

I felt God had thrown us a curve through no fault of our own and it pissed me off.



However, had that money come in when we expected it, it would not have come into our hands last month as we approached all the living expenses involved with her cancer diagnosis.

The Lord Jesus knew when we'd need that cash most, and, over my vehement objection, He arranged for it to come in when we did most need it.

He knows what's needed when.

And nobody else does.

Case in point: in different ways all four Gospels tell about this party girl who poured perfume on Jesus and dried His feet with her hair. (Think of four guys with cameras taking snapshots at the same party—different details, different camera angles, but all accurate—so don't worry about supposed discrepancies in the four accounts. They are all four true and accurate.)

The host the party, a man named Simon, did not know why the woman did this; he criticized Jesus for letting a sinful woman touch His body right there in public.

The disciples did not know why the woman did this; they thought the expensive perfume should have been sold and the money given to the poor.

The woman herself did not realize what she was doing or why she was doing it...

But Jesus knew.

He said, Leave her alone. She has anointed my body for burial beforehand.

He gave her the highest imaginable praise when He said, "She hath done what she could".

And He foretold that in any future age, in anyplace throughout the world, where His story is told, her story would be told also.

My point is that even though I do not understand what's going on in my own life, Jesus does...

And it's something good.

Something I seldom recognize.

Something better than I anticipate.

Something which eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, nor been imagined in the heart of men, something which the Lord hath prepared...



I have not learned that lesson yet. I think I get the general idea about all things working together for good.

But I still bitch and moan and complain and question God and resent it when things go not exactly to my liking.

But I'm beginning to suspect—just suspect, mind you—that even in bad times and tough circumstances and horrible prospects, the Lord God Almighty just may possibly know what He's doing.

I even suspect that He brought Ginny and me together for joy all those decades ago, although at the time we first met, I did not think she was even worth a mention in my diary.

Wednesday, March 20, 2013

Like Preparing For Christmas

Last night Ginny and I sat up into the wee small hours talking about life and love and family and body disposal.

I got that same feeling I used to get when we made plans for Christmas.

We talked about rearranging furniture, about gifts for each of our six kids, about worship services, about the coming of Christ into our lives, about mess and bother and shopping and finances and love.

We enjoyed such a good time!

And we enjoyed bowls of ice orange sherbet—to Hell with dieting and blood sugar readings for tonight. It's a time of feasting and celebration.

We tried to sing that old, I think 1940s, song, *Two Sleepy People Too Much n Love To say Goodnight*. And we laughed at ourselves for not remembering all the words.

But we know the feeling.

We also talked about the love shown in our family and how proud we are of each of our children in their individual trials, defeats, dreams, and accomplishments. All six are better than we deserve; we feel honored to be their parents.

We also talked about the silence of God.

I've heard that some people feel especially close to Christ in hard times of trial.

We just feel normal.

We are reading the Bible and praying together even less than we do in normal times. And if we do try to pray, we fall asleep without giving God a thought.



Well, you don't fall asleep in the presence of an enemy.

In preparing for Ginny's approaching death, we are not aware of any special grace or any communication from the Lord. In fact, at times it feels as though we are going through this test alone, almost as if there were no God in the universe. There is no word from Him.

That's to be expected.

In life, as in a schoolroom—Teacher does not talk while you are taking a test.

Friday, March 22, 2013

A Balanced Meal

Thursday Ginny and I endured one of her toughest days yet.

Enough said.

However many good things happened to us this week—too many to remember clearly, but here are a few highlights:

Our friend Ann brought us prayer shawls—finely woven wool triangles knitted by ladies in Ann's church. As the ladies knitted these comfort blankets, they pray for the elderly or ill person they will be given to. The card says, “Symbolically, they represent embracing hugs from those who care about you”. The warm wraps remind us of being enfolded in the loving arms of God.

On Wednesday four of our grown children, Jennifer, Fred, Johnny, and Patricia, gathered at our house to devote a day's work planting marigolds, begonias, and snapdragons at the windows for Ginny's viewing from her sickbed. A window box of petunias, a hummingbird feeder, and a birdbath also got installed in the nook. The kids also brought out tons of potted plants from winter storage, and installed a new shade tarp over the patio.

It gladdens my heart to see our children working in such harmony together. They made for such a happy day.

Usually I sleep in a chair so as to avoid disturbing Ginny with my nocturnal escapades encouraged by my prostate cancer. But for a while Thursday evening I lay beside her in our bed hopping to comfort her in her pain. As I enfolded her in my arms, Ginny began to pray; she prayed, not about her own pain, but about my arthritic pain which had been pestering me all day.

Speaking of pain, the hospice nurse tracks every prescription and vitamin bottle that comes into the house. The manufacture of my vitamins encase my pills in bottles with caps—it you turn the cap one way, any old



arthritic hand can open them; turned over, the cap becomes a child-proof seal requiring blasting to open.

After the nurse left, I tried to open my B-12 only to discover the bottle could not be opened with a crowbar!

Ginny, weak as she is, opened it for me.

Aggravating but the incident made me think of God's blessings. Keep in mind that the phrase *Children Of God* might well be rendered, "the three-year-olds of God"

I think some things God seals in Child-of-God-Proof containers. Some potent blessings He means for mature adults. Guys like me can't be trusted with His more potent matters; they are real and they are right at hand, but too powerful for us We have to leave those to be opened by some responsible adult in the faith.

The hospice nurse, my daughters, and many friend keep reminding me that I must take care of the caregiver. I need times of respite. I need times of rest. I need space. I need my own vitamins... I need to eat balanced meals.

I hear and I obey.

Yesterday, Johnny brought in fried chicken and some healthy salad stuff.

I ate a balanced meal.

First, I ate the left drumstick.

Then, I ate the right drumstick.

Can't get any more balanced that that!

Monday, March 25, 2013

Rocking Chairs Move, But Don't Go Anywhere

Ginny and I endure.

In the press of a night's hectic caregiving, I'd forgotten that yesterday was Palm Sunday,

But at 5 a.m. Ginny greeted me with the words, "Hosanna! Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord".

As we endure hardship, in the meantime, the rest of the family thrives moving around on different levels.

Saturday, Eve, our middle daughter, tended Ginny while I tended Ginny's garden flowers, getting soaked in a thunderstorm.



Eve bubbles with plans for an archaeological display at her library this summer.

Here is a photo of Ginny and Eve someone snapped at their Girls' Night Out in January:



Last week, our youngest son investigated an upwardly mobile career move to under the Golden Arches. I always knew that boy'd make something of himself.

Our eldest daughter struggles in the throes of house moving.

Also over the weekend, our daughter-in-love, an artist, supervised the installation of a commissioned work at a local children's hospital. She created this undersea view in fussed glass:



And... Oh?

What's that, Son?

It's not the Golden
Arches?

The job's in San
Francisco, at the
Golden Gate?

Darn!

And here I was
looking forward to
getting discount
burgers!





Wednesday, March 27, 2013
Meow-Meow Helps Out

Last week T.M., a lady in her 80s, sent Ginny a lovely white warm fuzzy robe.

Each day as many as a dozen people visit Ginny to help us out in dealing with the logistics of her fatal illness. Our home buzzes with helpers.

T.M. owns a cat.

While I appreciate all the loving-kindness family, friends and visitors show towards us, they also drive me nuts.

T.M.'s cat is named Meow-Meow.

I hate coming across as an ingrate, a complaining old man, but loving visitors drive me to distraction—nurses, children, friends, aids, neighbors, deliverymen—all come to help. And I hate to admit it but I need their help. I've asked for their help. I appreciate their help. But people move things.

T.M. phoned our house yesterday.

I think the Lord is moving me out of my comfort zone and trying, not too successfully, to teach me gratitude and tolerance.

Perhaps I'm in the same place the leader of Israel was in Joshua, Chapter 7, when the Lord God told him to stop praying and take action. The time for solitary contemplation is over for now and I need to be among people who love me.

I resist this change—some even talk of moving our bed into the living room for easy access. I balk and resist, but I'm trying to be willing to adopt to the changed circumstances in our life.

Last night, Ginny said, “John, this is hard for us on different levels”.

You see, I am a solitary person. I've always worked alone. I recharge my batteries in solitude. Writing demands uninterrupted concentration for me. Noise spooks me. I can't even go to the bathroom when I know other people are wandering the house.

I am a methodical person. I put things in a place and count on them still being there when I need them again. But people move things. While working on a computer the other day, the guys moved flower pots from the kitchen table. Friends bringing in lunch shove the milk aside to make room for left-overs in the frig. One test Ginny needed required ice, so things got moved around in the freezer and I could not find what I'd intended for dinner. And some of Ginny's medicines call for precise timing intervals and I'd set our alarm clock to sound, but someone



helpfully reset the clock when its annoying buzzer went off—they not knowing what that sound would mean to me.

Everyone who comes into our house brings a cell phone. Bells, ringing, buzzing or musical chimes sound continually. The noise and confusion spooks me

T.M. Phoned because she could not find an essential medicine she needs. She thought her daughter, or one of my daughters, may have put it in a different place when they visited her. They'd picked up a brand new prescription for her and thought they'd placed it on a bedside table. It was no longer there and T.M. needed to take it immediately. She thought one of the girls might still have the medicine in their purse. She'd searched high and low in her house—no prescription to be found.

In Ginny's illness several kind people have offered to give her a cat. Ginny loves cats. Every Saturday, she browses the Cat Saturday site on The Chive. While she browses cat pictures, I browse photos of bikini girls on the same website. Ginny says, “You look at photos of your kind of pussies, I'll look at my kind”.

Cat pictures decorate the walls of her office. And Yesterday, our eldest daughter brought Ginny a cute wooden cat statue for the shelf. The hospice people even offer *Pet Therapy* in which they bring in cats and dogs to visit sick people to cheer them up.

We do not want animals in our house. We have enough problems without fleas. But I even offered to get Ginny a cat if that would comfort her. But Ginny declined *Pet Therapy* and all offers of a cat.

Thank God! Look what happened to poor T.M.

You see, while she and daughters searched desperately for the missing medicine bottle, they finally discovered that Meow-Meow had discovered a new toy—a round prescription medicine bottle. When you bat it off the table, it rolls. Pills rattle inside. You can bat it again and again and chase it across the floor and under the bed....

At least the kind visitors in our house, while they move aside flower pots, towels, books, ashtrays, ice trays, milk cartons, clocks and car keys—at least none of our helpers have toyed with life-saving medicines under the bed.

And Meow-Meow licks his paws, unconcerned, ready to curl up by the Franklin Stove, wondering why his attendants get so excited. What's the fuss? Wake me when it's time to eat?



Thursday, March 28, 2013
Before Easter Comes

Gin and I are having a rough morning.

She felt too sick to talk on the phone with a good friend from work who called to see about her. I've fielded phone calls from many people already.

And I've just yelled curses through the door at the poor innocent Meals On Wheels lady thinking she was someone else knocking at our door unannounced.

For God only knows what reason, over the past four days all seven of Ginny's goldfish died. Perhaps it was because of radical temperature fluctuations recently. I can think of no other reason. They had thrived in beauty for months before hand.

Now, I'll add cleaning and refurbishing the aquarium to my insurmountable task list for today.

Everyone must have read my venting post yesterday because not a single visitor showed up at our house. The quiet time gave Ginny and me a chance for a lengthy talk about her funeral arrangements and about many of our old-time friends who became casualties in Viet Nam.

And we remembered Paul, an old flame of Ginny's. Oddly enough, Paul was my best friend and although both Ginny and I knew him, we did not know him at the same time. She went to highschool with him, and I met him in college. Paul was one of those guys, unlike me darn it, who caused every girl who ever saw him to swoon. He was by far the most popular man on campus, where I was an unknown wallflower nerd. He was an atheist and I a Christian, yet something clicked and we became best friends throughout our college days.

By fluke, once Paul and I served as judges in a beauty contest for Miss College, but Paul's true love and joy was auto racing. He won many events at local raceways; and he looked forward to a professional career as a race driver...

Alas, Paul died in a car wreck.

Ginny and I honored his memory, and the memories of our friends lost in Viet Nam, and other friends long-dead, in a solemn conversation all morning.

Gin still hopes to attend church on Easter morning, and I'm preparing the logistics, but since it taxes her strength to the uttermost to just sit 15 minutes on our own back deck, I doubt if she can endure the dressing, travel and length of a church service.



We'll see.

In thinking about Easter, once again I'm drawn to what I think may be the most important thing, among the 30+ books and hundreds of articles, I ever wrote.

I refer to "The Ugliest Picture In The World" at <http://www.cowart.info/Monthly%20Features/Ugly%20pix/Ugly%20%20pix.htm> .

Please follow that link. In preparing for Easter and resurrection joy, I think it important to think about the cost that came before.

All this does have meaning.

Wonderful meaning.

Saturday, March 30, 2013
Our good Good Friday

My poor Ginny described her cancer misery all Thursday night long as being in Hell...Then, God's Friday, Good Friday morning dawned.

At 7 a.m. A knock on the door brought our friend Wes in bearing bacon, egg and cheese biscuits. Wes said that as he got off night shift at work, he felt God urging him to call on us. I went outside to tend bird feeders leaving Ginny and him to talk. I have no idea what they talked about; there's no reason for me to know. This was not about me. Wes only stayed a short while, but afterwards Ginny seemed calmer, more at peace.

A little later, as she napped, Hospice Chaplain "Papa" Williams dropped by to talk with me about God's love. As a retired fireman, he showed interest in my book about the history of Jacksonville's fire department. Our prayers and conversation about something other than medicine refreshed me. Dr. Williams held my hand and prayed that the Shekinah glory of the Lord would grace our home even as we suffer.

At lunch, our daughter Jennifer trimmed crust off bread and spread peanut-butter and jelly on a small soft sandwich—all Ginny could tolerate eating today.

Then a business call came through.

Ginny is scheduled for a medical procedure at a local hospital next week, a palliative measure, not a cancer treatment. It's designed to temper some of her discomfort and daily misery.



Nurse Peggy had called to process intake procedures, give pre-op instructions, and update patient information—pure business—but as we talked about insulin, laxatives and other medicines, our conversation turned to marriage, human love, and the love of Christ shown in His death for us on that first Good Friday.

That business call transformed into—what can I call it but phone worship in praise of our Savior.

Nurse Peggy said, “Mr. Cowart, I’m crying”.

“So am I,” I said.

This nurse I’ve never seen prayed, cried, and worshiped with me. And, Ginny, who was hearing only my end of the conversation wept with joy at this unseen lady’s caring.

But then God’s Friday got even gooder...

For weeks Ginny has said she hopes she lives and feels well enough to attend church on Easter Sunday. After Thursday night’s misery, I doubt she will be able to stand the drive or sit up in her wheelchair for a worship service. So I called the Rev. Mark Eldridge, pastor of Christ’s Anglican Church, Jacksonville and asked if he would bring communion to our home. Even though we have never attended his church, and we’ve had few dealings with him, I called on him because I know him to be a man acquainted with pain and loss

Well, as everyone knows, any pastor enjoys plenty of leisure time during the Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter activities of his church... So the Rev. Eldridge left the ninety and nine, dropped everything to shuffle his schedule (which included a wedding) to come serve Holy Communion to Ginny and me in our living room.

I knelt on the floor beside her chair holding her hand as the pastor administered the Sacrament to us. All three of us wept in sadness, joy, and worship of the Lord Jesus and His love for us.

For an hour after Mark left, Ginny and I sat in silence with tears streaming down our faces. We felt awe. We felt our own living room had become holy ground.

Yes, there is a storm.

Yes, dark clouds threaten.

Yes, lightening pain flashes.

Yes, thunder roars frighten us in this day of our personal mini-Gethsemane.



I can not trivialize what we are going through by saying it's anything less than a bitch...but today, God sent three good and godly men into our living room. He gives our daughter a loving heart to serve. He arranged that no one on the hospital's numerous staff but Nurse Peggy would call for the advanced paperwork.

Somehow, the idea of God's presence permeated our dusty living room with the un-vaccumed rug, and where the pastor had to push aside an overflowing ashtray to set down his communion kit, where the cursor blinks on my computer screen, where half-empty coffee cups litter the table amid peanut-butter sandwich scraps—

What an odd place to become holy ground.

What an odd place to glimpse a rainbow.

Thanks be to God.



Easter Sunday, March 31, 2013
Church Squirrels

Friday morning as I listened to the radio, I heard the station was holding a contest; they'd play an excerpt of movie dialog and the first caller who could name that movie, won a prize.

They played a snatch from the movie soundtrack.

Then they aired a commercial.



Then the announcer spoke with the first caller, “Can you name that movie”?

The caller named the film.

The announcer asked, “Did you enjoy watching that movie”?

The caller said, “I have not seen the movie”.

“If you haven't seen the movie, how did you know that clip”?

The caller said, “I read the book”!

Saturday, Ginny and I tried a dry run for church. Got her up and dressed and wheeled her onto the back deck to see if she could tolerate being up so we'd have some idea if she could be up for the Easter service.

We decided that she is too weak... We remind me of the church squirrels story.

Squirrels plagued every church in this little town. At every service in every church squirrels ran in the rafters, rolled nuts down the aisles, chattered during the sermon. All the preachers went crazy trying to get rid of the squirrels.

The Roman Catholic priest tried an exorcism.

Still the squirrels overran every service, running in the rafters, rolling nuts in the aisles, chattering during the homily.

The Methodist minister instituted a health program to socialize the squirrels and incorporate them into the town's mainstream culture.

Still every service in his church, squirrels ran in the rafters, rolled nuts, chattered.

The Baptist preacher tried immersing squirrels... and who can blame him if he held them under water a trifle longer than other baptismal candidates?

More squirrels over ran his service, rolling nuts, etc.

At an interdenominational ministerial alliance meeting to discuss the problem all churches had in common with unruly squirrels, the assembled preachers realized that no squirrels had shown up at the town's Episcopal church. Why not?

The Episcopal rector explained, “ Squirrels used to bother us too. But I baptized and confirmed them, making them full-fledged Episcopalians. Now they only come to church on Christmas and Easter”.

Saturday our eldest daughter, Jennifer, came over and went grocery shopping for us. As she unloaded groceries in the kitchen she told us the



latest news flash about Billy Graham—he was arrested near his home in North Carolina for speeding on Interstate 95!

It seems the evangelist, now elderly, had been invited to speak at a church conference. Officials sent a limo to pick the dignitary up and drive him to the meeting.

On the way, Graham asked the driver to switch places because he'd never driven such a luxurious car before and the driver got in back while Graham sped down I-95.

Highway trooper pulled him over for speeding. Got his license and registration and called state headquarters.

“Capt,” the trooper said, “Do we still let important people off with just a warning, or do we ticket 'em”?

“You haven't stopped the senator again, have you”?

“Even more important that the senator this time”.

“Well, who is it? The President”?

“Sir, I think I've stopped Jesus because it's Billy Graham driving the limo”.

Happy Easter from John & Ginny

Tuesday, April 2, 2013

Popsicles, Brussels Sprouts, and Porno

My beautiful Ginny ran a high fever yesterday. Since her rare form of cancer precludes use of the usual pain and fever remedies, we had to cool her down some way.

Three nurses clustered around her bed. Sixteen members of our family had gathered for an Easter picnic in our backyard. Beautiful gifts of flowers filled our bedroom room. Our children took turns soothing her brow and spoon-feeding Ginny crushed fruit juice Popsicles.

Someone, I think it was Jennifer, came up with a resourceful response to the fever problem— The ladies. took packs of frozen Brussels Sprouts, peas, and green beans from our refrigerator; they wrapped the sealed plastic packets in bath towels, and placed these cooling aids under Ginny's armpits and all around her—like a display in the produce section of a grocery store.

I'd never have thought of doing that. Yet the odd tactic worked.

Frozen veggies hold their temperature longer than ice-packs.

By evening Gin's temperature dropped back into normal range.



Thank God for sending us resourceful people with good ideas.

Monday, a different nurse, one who does not know us, came to check out Ginny's condition... I think we shocked the poor dear.

When she walked in the house, she discovered me kneeling on the floor beside Gin's chair, we were locked in eachother's arms, and praying together...

A few minutes later in our bedroom, Ginny had to assume the usual position for a patient having a catheter inserted.

Naturally, I observed and commented with one of my usual tasteful remarks.

Ginny responded in kind, and the two of us began laughing hysterically about the possibility of us staring in a porno film...

Poor little nurse did not know what to make of us—crazy Christians long in love....Thanks be to God.

Friday, April 5, 2013

Happy Distractions, Familiar Comforts

Like all busy people, I'm never too busy to pause and tell you how busy I am!

Frantic activity fills my days as I care for Ginny in her terminal illness.

Sometime I plan to write a few tips for caregivers to make life easier, but I'm too busy to do that this evening. Instead here I'll mention an observation about serious illness as Ginny and I live through it.

I notice that familiar things attract her as distractions from her cancer's symptoms.

For instance, she returns to familiar foods, foods related to her childhood. She's more likely to be able to eat a peanutbutter and jelly sandwich than a steak.

The familiar comforts.

She finds enjoyment in reading a book about Mrs. Pickrel's Cow going to Mars, or an Agatha Christy novel than in reading recent books.

Thank God for Pandora Radio at <http://www.pandora.com/> . There I can play music from the 1960s, music from our courting days. Anyone can chose to their own taste,and the site is free.

Gin also enjoys watching old tv shows (I Love Lucy, Twilight Zone, Gunsmoke, etc) on *Me-TV*; the initials stand for Memorable



Entertainment Television, a network which showcases classic shows from the 50s through the 80s.

Old familiar things comfort.

The other day as Ginny and I thanked God for our many blessings in this bitch of a time, I happened to think of a photo we snapped while on vacation in West Florida in 2003; docked in Apalachicola, we saw a shrimp boat named...

Excuse me: just had to do four back-to-back wheelchair transfers—busy, busy, busy...

The boat's name was: *God's Blessing*



Thinking of that shrimpboat sparked our interest and I set up a slideshow for Ginny of those vacation photos on my computer.

We saw a bald eagle rooting high above a stand of smoke trees:



As we viewed the photos, we talked about what a happy life we have had and, even in blood and piss and gore, are having now.

Here is a photo of Gin on a windy beach:



Here she poses in front of a museum fossil:



By the way, during an earlier wheelchair transfer, Helen asked: Q—Why do you never hear a pterodactyl go to the bathroom?

A—Because the P is silent.

Ginny laughed at her memory of me climbing a sand dune:



And here is a happy photo of Ginny trying to seduce me in our motel room:



However, I'm happy to report that I stood firm!

Thanks be to God.

Saturday, April 6, 2013
Fair Weather Sailors

Friday three or four assistants helped me by soothing the patient's brow with cool clothes.

They arranged her flowers and fed her applesauce.

They read her stories and fluffed her pillows.

At 4:30, they inserted a powerful suppository and then all drove home.

I've spent an interesting night.

Monday, April 8, 2013
They That Wait...

Waiting rooms—they happen to all of us.

You drive someone to the airport or to the bus depot or to the train station. You arrive on time for them to catch their flight. Their bags are packed; they're ready to go. You've eaten a last meal together. Last minute instructions have been given. All the important things have been said. No business left undone. Kisses exchanged. Hugs given and received. Love expressed. Nothing left to be said or done...



Then the intercom announces that the flight has been delayed and will not arrive for another hour and 45 minutes!

All on earth you can do is hang around the waiting room and wait.

Ginny and I are living in that waiting room.

We know she is dieing. We have given and received all endearments. No unfinished business. She's ready to go. I'm ready for her to leave.

But her flight Home still circles the airport.

And all we can do is hang around the waiting room and wait.

Is it any wonder that so many people feel relief when their loved one finally departs? I think Ginny will be glad to finally die; and, while I will weep heartbroken, I'll also be glad to see her leave for Home.

Funny thing: in a stupor of pain the other day, delirious, Ginny said, "I'll get to Heaven first and get things all straightened out before you come".

"Honey," I asked, "What do you think you'll need to straighten out in Heaven"?

"Whatever is amiss," she said and fell back asleep.

She felt cold, and I covered her with a blanket, and as I did I realized that it was [the blanket that bum had given me](#) back on December 21, 2011.

How precious!

Tiny reminders of God's goodness surround us even in our situation.

Ginny's strength ebbs.

I'm exhausted with caregiving.

Yet, in the frustrations, boredom, weariness, and pain here in the "passenger lounge" we still rely on the Scripture spoken by the Prophet Issiah:

They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength;
 They shall mount up with wings as eagles;
 They shall run, and not be weary;
 They shall walk, and not faint.

Tuesday, April 9, 2013 Wheelchair Transfers

Eight. Ten. Twenty times a day I transfer Ginny in or out of her wheelchair. Because of the various tubes, I try to move in a precise order



to keep from getting tangled. Sometimes, she interrupts my order and I'm in danger of dropping her on the floor.

And, because there is no room for my own wheeled walker, she holds my cane as I strain to move her twix here and there. Ever see a Keystone Cops movie? You get the picture.

I'm writing this at five in the morning with only twenty minutes sleep because she has spent a restless night needing to be moved a number of times. And this last time bringing her out to the living room, we got cross with eachother and snapped at eachother in impatience.

As we each apologized for our mutual impatience, Ginny remarked that we both want to do the same thing, but we are trying to do it at different speeds—it's like sex, or like faith in Christ.

We want the same thing, but we go about getting it in different ways, some of which work, and some of which get us nowhere.

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".

Faith, not works.

On the other hand, St. James said, "Wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?...As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also".

Works without faith.

How does this work?

I love Chinese food, so picture sitting down to a feast of sweet and sour chicken and the waiter hands you only one chopstick. It's called faith. With only one chopstick, all you can do is make a mess. With the other chopstick, the one called works, you enjoy the feast.

Faith without works or works without faith equals Chop suey!

Or picture being in a rowboat with only one oar, one called works. No matter how hard you row, you only spiral in circles. If you only have the oar called faith, then you spiral in the opposite direction. You need to row with both oars to get where you want to go.

I'll spare you the illustration about sex except to say the man and the woman want to get to the same place and need to adjust and move together to get there.

But this whole faith and works thing is a gift from our Almighty Loving God; it's all His doing.



I get so weary picking Ginny up and moving her. I feel so weak. I fear dropping her. Sometimes, she feels strong enough to help with the transfer; at other times, she's a dead weight. Sometimes, I'm strong enough to lift her and sometimes I petter out.

Just now, I perked a pot of coffee... then I brought her an empty cup out to the living room!

We are getting the hang of this being sick/giving care thing.

Earlier this evening during a quiet moment, we discussed burial options, graves, cremation, body donation, banking, insurance, and other business matters. For two Christians who look forward in joy to the Resurrection, we sure have a lot of mundane mechanical matters to take care of first.

So we are moving forward to the trip Home. And that day of rejoicing.

But, in the meantime, it's hard. And we are learning how to be in love in the midst of pain, weariness and tangled tubes. But, it is hard. Very hard.

In fact this morning as I transferred her from wheelchair to recliner, I told her "Honey, once you are safely dead and Home and this is over, I swear I'll never try to pick up another woman ever again as long as I live"!

Thursday, April 11, 2013 **The Zebra In My Living Room**

Years ago I visited the penthouse apartment of a wealthy publisher who hunted big game on safari as his hobby.

A tiger he'd shot provided an area rug. Antelope heads of various sorts decorated the walls, except for the floor-to-ceiling glass wall overlooking the St Johns River. A grand piano stood in the conversation pit which also featured three extra-long sofas and a roaring lion's head.

But the most note-worthy thing to me was a whole stuffed zebra which stood at the entrance to his home office off that living room. I wondered why in the world anyone would be proud of shooting a zebra???

That's just prelude for a tip about visiting sick people at home.

I have given keys to our home to several of my grown children. The idea being that if they were to phone as I care for Ginny in her terminal illness and they did not get an answer, they are to wait 15 minutes assuming I'm doing medical stuff with my hands full, then phone again and if there is still no answer, they can assume that I've fallen or died or run off with a girlfriend and they are to use their key to come in and check out what's wrong.



Sound prudent and reasonable?

Last evening I fell asleep watching the six O'Clock news.

Jennifer, Terri and Brandon drove over to our house to bring us grilled pork chops for supper. Getting no answer when they knocked on the door, they unlocked it without having phoned me—a good way to get shot, by the way.

Now Jennifer is a woman of Rubinesque stature. She was wearing a white pantsuit with black stripes.

From a sound sleep, I startled away with this figure in white and black looming close over me.

What in the hell is a zebra doing in my living room, I thought!

Waking from sleep to confront a zebra standing over me confused me.

Here I am dreaming the dreams of the innocent, and POP, a zebra stands over me!

The suddenness caught me by surprise.

It startled me.

It scared me.

Later, as we talked about funeral arrangements for Ginny, I thought of the words of Jesus at His trial in Matthew, Chapter 24. He talked about how people will be going about their business unaware, then suddenly, the show is over. The house lights come up and we'll see reality for the first time.

Jesus said, "As the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be".

The Second Coming will be like waking to find a zebra in your living room! Don't believe me? Ask any theologian.

Anyhow, once awake I discovered that there is no stuffed zebra in my living room.

However, I do need to sweep the house.

The only dead animal around here is that Florida roach down the hall with his legs in the air.

Saturday, April 13, 2013
Specious Promises

Remember the publisher who shot zebras and kept one mounted in his penthouse living room?



I'd forgotten the creep until that incident the other night with my daughter in her zebra pantsuit, but something else happened last week to remind me about him.

I'd been working as a janitor while writing a bunch of newspaper and magazine articles. One night this wealthy publisher approached me in the building where I mopped floors and cleaned urinals. He'd read some article I wrote and asked if I happened to have written a book manuscript.

Obviously the hand of God bringing my writing skill to the publisher's attention—Right!

Just so happened that I had a book manuscript of *The Lazarus Projects*, my first novel, a science fiction tale set in Bible times.

The guy read my manuscript. He came back to me saying my work was wonderful! He said reading my script made him cry and laugh and worship. He wanted to publish my book. He brought in his managing editor for a conference with me. They discussed press runs, release dates, cover designs—heavy stuff for a first-time novelist to hear.

They told me to buy a new suit, a dignified gray suit as befitted a published author, for a book-signing event at an upcoming American Booksellers Convention in Dallas.

And... while preparing for my debut at the convention, they said there was a little chore they'd like me to do for them... something only a little, borderline, illegal. Nothing to do with my manuscript but they'd regard it as a personal favor if I'd do it.

That's how I ended up in the publisher's penthouse with the dead zebra—where I declined to do the illegal favor.

Silence.

A week later, the postman delivered *The Lazarus Projects* manuscript back to me with a xeroxed form letter saying my manuscript was of too poor a quality to be considered for publication by their prestigious company.

I had to go back to cleaning urinals as a janitor.

Squished hope. Crushed dream. Disappointment. Resentment. Bitterness.... The only way I could handle that was to reconsider why I wrote in the first place—to honor the Lord, to amuse myself, to help other people, to support my family.

Except for the amusement part, those were same reasons I scrubbed urinals.



I decided that if I really wanted to be an honest Christian, not to just use Jesus to enhance my own reputation, then, I would clean each urinal as though Jesus Christ Himself would be the next guy to piss there.

Yes, I'd leaned on the arm of an influential man, a big game hunter, an entrepreneur, a noted publisher. I'd built cloud castles of fame and glory for my self based on specious promises and I'd suffered horrible disappointment...

I think they call that LIFE.

Over the years, the same sort of thing has happened to me with three other religious publishing houses.

Incidentally, anyone interested in reading *The Lazarus Projects*, first of the 30+ books I've either written, edited, or published, can find it at www.bluefishbooks.info

Recently one of my children suffered a similar experience—out of the blue, a prestigious multi-national approached him as a recruit for his dream job. After hours of intensive phone interviews, they flew him to their headquarters, put him up in a luxury hotel, wined him and dined him and gave him a tour of their plant and built his hopes up to a fever expectancy...

Then, made him wait a week... delayed their answer for another week... then the company decided not to fill that position.

Same sort of thing happened to Queen Anne Boleyn. King Henry VIII decided to cut her head off at six in the morning. She dressed for her execution, gave mementos to her maids, said her prayers—then the jailer announced her execution had been put off till six in the evening... at six, he announced it had been put off till the next morning... then till next afternoon...

Each time the queen psyched herself up for death, only to be fobbed off till another time. Eventually, they did cut off her head, but she's been worn out by specious promises of release.

The evil one loves to torment God's people with specious promises.

In Hebrews 11, the Bible's Faith Chapter, the author tells about people persecuted for their love of God. Some were beheaded. Some tied in goatskins and fed to wild beasts in the arena. Some burned alive. Some had to suffer the trial of mocking and scourging and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death; they were lured with tempting offers; they were sawn asunder; they were slaughtered by the sword. Some had to go about wrapped in the skins of sheep and goats, utterly destitute, oppressed, cruelly treated—



Noticed the phrase, “lured with tempting offers”.

J.B. Phillips translated Hebrews 11:36 as “Others were exposed to the test of public mockery and flogging, and to the torture of being left bound in prison. They were killed by stoning, by being sawn in two; they were tempted by specious promises ...”.

Ah yes, tempted by specious promises...

Our hopes built up... then dashed.

The ideal job offered... then snatched away.

The girl of your dreams flirts... then crosses her legs.

The tv preacher offers to cure Ginny of her cancer... but only if she sends money and has enough faith... And if there is no cure, it's all your own fault because your faith was too little.

There's a sure return on your annuity investment... but the company is experiencing cash flow problems when you try to collect.

And the evil one laughs and laughs.

What a game!

They fall for it every time.

Lord, what fools these mortals be!

Ginny and I, in the midst of cancer care stuff, don't pray together as often as we used to. Our devotions have come to encompass tiny verses on a flip-over desk calendar. In the light of her impending death, we talk a lot about the love of God and resurrection.

Yesterday's verse on that flip-calendar for us was Psalm 16:11—In Your presence there is fullness of joy; in Your right hand are pleasures forevermore!

There are no specious promise with God.

He does not disappoint.

Tuesday, April 16, 2013

What Anxiety?

As Nurse Flower from Hospice got out of her car in front of our house to attend Ginny yesterday, she stepped into a nest of fire ants.

They made their tiny stinging presence know as she walked into our living room. Poor Nurse Flower kicked off her shoes and did the stinging dance as a bunch of us brushed her legs and swatted Florida's worse biting ants.



Nurse Flower was one of Eleven People who visited our house yesterday between 8 a.m. and 11:30 p.m.

So many wonderful folks have rallied to our support.

Sometimes their help overwhelms us.

But I can't began to tank them all or to enumerate their many kindnesses as they live out the love of God in caring for His troubled kids (i.e. Ginny and me).

As tv news reported about some asshole who bombed the Boston Marathon, my eldest son, Fred, the one who lives under a bridge, saturated the fire ant bed with insecticide on the ground.

Here's a photo of the carnage in Boston:



Last Friday our youngest daughter, Patricia, climbed on the roof to remove storm-tossed branches and clear rain gutters. Here's a photo of her up there:



From rooftop to ground level, our home is protected by God's kind angels in the guise of our own children, friends and neighbors. His love surrounds us above, below and on every side.

In the light of God's loved-inspiring helpers, neither asshole bombers nor aggressive cancer have any comeback answer.

The world does what the world does.

But so does Our Father.

Sunday, after a week of making 30 to 40 phone calls to area funeral parlors for me, Terri gave me her search results and drove me to the one I chose. There, I pre-paid for site, interment, and all expenses for both Ginny and me on our deaths. In this I thought much on the way Abraham cared for Sarah in Genesis 23; and I tried to follow his example.

Here is a photo I snapped as I stood at our interment site:



Later that afternoon, I told Ginny all about it, told her about our gravemarkers and inscriptions (she gets to chose the words to go on mine), showed her the paperwork I signed, and we watched a slide-show of photos I took at our gravesite.

She said she was happy with the arrangements I had made and pleased with me for making them.... Love takes many odd forms, doesn't it?

Donald & Helen tended Ginny while I took care of that cemetery business. Eve had watched her Friday last, delaying a Second Honeymoon trip to do so. Brandon came in yesterday bearing an armload of flowers which he arranged in vases and placed around the house. Judge Merritt drew up Power of Attorney papers for us. Phil came and offered to cook for us. Johnny not only watches over us daily but runs all sorts of valuable errands driving all over town. He drove a carload of folk from our house to do grocery shopping yesterday

Jennifer comes anytime I call her and does invaluable nurse stuff (believe me, you don't want to know!). She checks on our wellbeing continually and runs interference between me and the doctors involved.

Wes consults on medical stuff and, without my asking, he realized that sleeping in a chair as I do, an ottoman for my feet would help, he went right out and bought one.



And Ginny lets it all swirl around her without letting any of the activity disturb her tranquility. She rests in quietness and confidence stronger than any of us. She is the most contented person I have ever known—always has been.

Yesterday, Nurse Flower, Wes and Jennifer conferred in a medical professionals' conference and decided a new pill might help Ginny.

“What for?” Ginny asked.

The medical professionals tried to explain why another damn pill might be beneficial. (At one point doctors had Ginny taking 13 pills a day).

Wes said, “Virginia, this medicine will help relieve any sense of anxiety”.

“Anxiety?” Ginny asked, puzzled. “What anxiety? All I'm doing is dieing”.

Thursday, April 18, 2013 A True Football Fan

The Hospice folks color code various cancer bandages I apply to Ginny; this makes it easier to keep things straight when I'm working in a rush or in middle-of-the-night situations.

Yesterday's two bandages came in two colors. One was blue, the other orange.

Ginny watched as I applied them.

She said, “That's good. At least when I die, I'll go out wearing Gator colors”.

Saturday, April 20, 2013 A Moving Hymn

Ten workers and family gathered in our living room Saturday for the delicate operation of transferring Ginny from recliner to a hospital bed we'd set up in the dining room. Poor Gin would scream in pain to be touched at all.

Fortunately, yesterday as they bathed her, Eve, Jennifer and Terri had laced pull-sheets beneath her. Today, Donald, Helen, Brandon, Johnny, me and the two young men who delivered and set up the hospital bed managed the task of transferring her.



We rolled up the edges of the pull-sheets to create a stretcher affair and all laid hold. On Donald's count, we gently lifted and accomplished the move hardly disturbing Ginny at all.

Thanks be to God.

The hospice folk indicate that only a day or two remain before she's Home.

Later, as we all sat around the living room catching our breath, I tried to sing Ginny's favorite hymn, *Lord Of All Hopefulness*.

I could not remember all the words and I kept sobbing at the beauty of my darling's waking, working, Homing and sleeping.

So, since I could not sing them, I decided to print the words here:

Lord of all hopefulness, Lord of all joy,
Whose trust, ever childlike, no cares can destroy,
Be there at our waking, and give us, we pray,
Your bliss in our hearts, Lord, at the break of the day.

Lord of all eagerness, Lord of all faith,
Whose strong hands were skilled at the plane and the lathe,
Be there at our labors, and give us, we pray,
Your strength in our hearts, Lord at the noon of the day.

Lord of all kindness, Lord of all grace,
Your hands swift to welcome, your arms to embrace,
Be there at our homing, and give us, we pray,
Your love in our hearts, Lord, at the eve of the day.

Lord of all gentleness, Lord of all calm,
Whose voice is contentment, whose presence is balm,
Be there at our sleeping, and give us, we pray,
Your peace in our hearts, Lord, at the end of the day.



Monday, April 22, 2013

**VIRGINIA COWART
1946--2013**

Virginia Cowart, 67, died Monday, April 22, 2013, at her home. In June, the Washington, D.C., native had retired from work she loved at the Jacksonville Children's Commission. She was a graduate from the University of North Florida where she learned to swim in spite of her great fear of water.

Virginia showed her deep love for Christ in her government work and in the way she cared for her husband, her family, and Jacksonville's poor. Among her private charities, for much of her life Ginny tithed one day a week serving in soup kitchens or in behind-the-scenes service at various local missions.

Her Florida family includes: John, her husband; and Jennifer, Terri, & Brandon; Donald, Helen & Maggie; Eve & Mark; Fred & John; and Patricia & Rob.

Her Maryland family includes: Cathy; Jack & Sue; Dan & Linda; Jeff & Carol; Mark & Beckie; and Rikki.

Virginia also leaves God's beloved congregation of poor people in Jacksonville; therefore, in lieu of flowers, her family requests that donations in Ginny's memory be given to The Lord's Food Pantry, 5536 Ortega Farms Blvd., Jacksonville, 32210; or to a charity of your choice.

A memorial service, led by the Rev. Wesley Bassett, will be held at 2 p.m. Sunday, April 28, beside the Memory Lake at Riverside Memorial Park, 7242 Normandy Blvd., with a reception to follow at her home.





Thursday, April 25, 2013
A Solemn Happy Vigil

For the past few days I've bivouacked in a stand of camphor trees in the parking lot beside a crematory.

A tough, uncomfortable, but happy experience which fulfilled a promise I made to Ginny months ago. Yes, like a love-struck schoolboy I told her that I'd carry her books and walk her all the way Home. Wouldn't leave her till the garden gate closed and she went inside.

So, with the help of Stephen Kuzniar, director of Affordable Cremation Solutions, I managed to obey all legal requirements and yet keep Ginny's body lying in state at home for the first 24 hours following her death. Steve made all the arrangements just as I wished. I followed his van taking her to the crematorium where the body had to be refrigerated for an additional 24 hours till the Medical Examiner cleared all the legal paperwork necessary before cremation.

Since I was not allowed to stay inside the crematory, I did the next best thing by keeping vigil in the parking lot where Ken Briscoe, who operates the crematorium with his father, who is also named Ken, befriended me.

When I first saw Ken, my thought was *Where is his Harley!*

Ken is a huge bear of a man with gruff workboots on his feet, bandanna headgear, a sporty beard—and the kindest heart.

While fulfilling every legal requirement of his ministry to the dead, Ken showed me every courtesy and checked often during my vigil to make sure I was ok in this rough neighborhood (two shootings down the street Monday night and three reports of attacks by youth gangs on pedestrians last week).

While he could not let me stay in the building, he brought me cold water, candy bars, soft drinks and sometimes paused to talk with me about the deaths of people he cares about in his own family. And about Ginny.

The gentleness and kindness of this former Marine overwhelmed me.

So, what did I do all those hours in the camphor tree shade?

Well, I tried to read C.S. Lewis's book *A Grief Observed*. While over the years other books by Lewis have helped me, in this one, I don't think he knew what he was talking about. I could not find a single common thread between what he experienced with the death of his wife and what I'm feeling with Ginny's death.



I'd planned to stay all night, every night, but I wimped out when my sight and arthritis became too painful for me to sit up. So I drove home long enough to perk a pot of coffee and shower. I can imagine Ginny laughing at my fool attempt to declare my undying love by my macho-man act. I can imagine her saying, *John, don't be so melodramatic. You may be shaped like Queen Victoria but you don't need to act like her!*

However, I do what I do because I do it.

I returned to my vigil to await dawn. And as Dawn broke I watched birds to fill my time. The crematorium stands under a flyway of waterfowl passing between the marshes of Moncrief Creek and the Ribault River; I watched lovely white cranes and herons and wood storks. A V of wild ducks split the sky while on the ground a red ladybug drank dew drops along a blade of grass. A flight of starling swirled patterns in the air above unsuspecting people on the ground. And a humming bird diligently worked a flowerbed at the house across the street.

Beautiful life doing what life does.

Once the Medical Examiner's certificates came through, under the provisions of a witness, Ken allowed me inside. I saw Ginny's body in the furnace, I closed the blast doors (the garden gate so-to-speak).

As I pushed the button to start the furnace cycle, I prayed, *Lord, thank You so much for the privilege of being Ginny's husband. We've had a damn good run. Thank You, Jesus. Amen.*

As Ginny's ashes cooled, Steve returned to the crematorium with more legal papers for me to sign. Ken packaged the urn and performed one more act of kindness which he asked me not to mention. That brought me to tears. A handshake would not suffice. I hugged him as I wept.

With Ginny's bronze urn in hand. I drove home. My vigil over for the moment.

I've heard it said that a man can be anywhere on earth at any hour of the day or night and if someone asks what he is doing there, all he has to say is, "I'm waiting for my wife" and they will understand and leave him alone.

So, I suppose I could have summed up this entire diary entry simply by saying, "I've been waiting for my wife".

I've done a lot of that over the past 44 years...

This week, as always, she's worth waiting for.



Saturday, April 27, 2013

Condolence Messages... and otherwise

Friday as I crawled on hands and knees tending Ginny's garden, the phone rang—a lady in tears wanting me to testify on her behalf in court.

I refused.

For one thing, I have no first-hand knowledge of her matter, just hearsay. But, more importantly I told her, “I have bigger fish to fry. I'm preparing for my wife's funeral. I have neither time nor energy to get involved in your squabble”.

“But I thought you were my friend,” she whined.

I'm getting Ginny's garden ready for the reception to follow her funeral. I have not worked out there for months. Caring for Gin left me no time to tend her flowers and I want the garden to look nice as friends, neighbors and strangers come to honor her.

Yes, people from all over the world have written messages of condolence. E-mails and phone calls from Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Denmark, France, Great Britain, Norway—all over the world have come in from people whose lives Ginny somehow touched. Including people she worked with and even from people who never met her.

Michelle, Ginny's friend and co-worker, said, “Many tears were shed yesterday at the Children's Commission when we received word of Virginia's passing. We know her suffering has ended and she is in the arms of our Savior. We look forward to seeing her again one day”

Jack said, “I found Ginny to be extraordinarily memorable having met her but once, what a wide net of God's love was cast by your beloved Ginny”.

Then there was the distant relative who phoned me to say, “Johnny, I'm sorry about...(there was a long pause)... I've forgotten her name. You know, your wife”.

Could I have made that up?

Carol said, “Ginny was truly a great lady. A life well lived. My prayers and thoughts to you and the kids”.

A disgruntled South American reader of my blog offered these words of condolence, “Are u an ignorant stupid america christaian fuck??. what does america do to musslim terrorist?? i will tell you.. fuck them up. what does south american indigenus people do to christian people who



try to tell them dyrtly lies? fuck them up!! whats the problem u ignorant fuck?"

On the other hand, Sherrill, a local lady I have never met, touched me by saying:

Mr. Cowart,

You don't know me and I really never had the opportunity to work with your wife. I just remember her always being the "same way". Which is quite uncommon these days. She was a lovely woman. I'm writing to you to let you know how deeply touched I am by your words and your life with Mrs. Virginia. The love and respect that oozes out of your recollections are simply beautiful. I only pray that one day that God sends me a true love as He did with you and your wife. Your writing is inspiring and breathtaking..... Your words are passionate and raw. Thank you for sharing your last experiences with Mrs. Virginia..... Take care of yourself and know that through Mrs. Virginia's passing you have somehow uplifted a complete stranger..."

Many other people have sent me cards or quotations from Scripture or poetry. Thank all of you for your kind words, thoughts and prayers which sustain me in this rough time.



Monday, April 29, 2013
Ginny's Memorial Service



A man who had never met my wife bought the urn her ashes were buried in yesterday.

He asked that I not name him, but he had read about Ginny and became so impressed with her life that he felt she deserved better than the plastic urn that I could afford. In kindness he paid for the finest burnished bronze box available for her ashes.



I may have seen him in the crowd at the memorial service, but in the press of people I did not get to speak with him of my appreciation afterwards.

Never before have I heard so much talk of love as I did at Ginny's memorial service and reception yesterday .

Strange.

Here, as a besotted lover, I thought I loved her best. Alas, I am only one of many who treasure her. My voice broke as I read James Henry Hunt's 1835 poem:

Ginny kissed me when we met,
Jumping from the chair she sat in;
Time, you thief, who love to get
Sweets into your list, put that in!
Say I'm weary, say I'm sad,
Say that health and wealth have missed me,
Say I'm growing old, but add,
Ginny kissed me.

But in the course of the day many other people testified to how Ginny spread an aura of love among them in her daily walk.

Odd, I thought I was the one who knew her. At her service, I learned from others that she was even better than I had imagined.

A week or so before Ginny died, she told about a dream of being in a beautiful garden filled with hummingbirds.

The night before she died, as Terri and I were keeping watch, Ginny from her silent coma distinctly spoke her last word—John.

But it was her tone of voice that intrigued us. She was not calling for help. No, she used the same tone I've often heard over the years when she would say, "John, look at this pretty shell I found in the surf" or "John, here's a perfect bluejay feather" or "John, I think this hibiscus bud is opening this morning"--Her tone in pronouncing my name was one of wonder at some beauty she saw and wanted me to know about.

Perhaps I'm reading more into what was a simple morphine-induced groan, but I suspect Ginny in her last hours caught a glimpse of something beautiful.

That's what I'd like to think anyhow.

In case you haven't noticed, Ginny married a Christian religious skeptic.



Last week, our daughter-in-law, Helen, was named one of Jacksonville's most influential and inspirational artists at the One Spark Arts and Innovation Festival.

When I brought Ginny's burnished bronze urn home from the crematorium, Helen, as an act of love, engraved it with Ginny's name and this hummingbird picture:





Ginny's Funeral Homily, April 28th by Wesley Bassett

Most merciful Father, who hast been pleased to take unto thyself thy servant, Ginny; grant to us who are still in our pilgrimage, and who walk as yet by faith, that having served thee with constancy on earth, we may be joined hereafter with thy blessed saints in glory everlasting; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

I have entitled the homily, “Lessons from Ginny”.

There is a story in the gospel accounts of a woman named Mary. She came to a supper where Jesus was guest just a few days before he was arrested and crucified. The guests were lying on the floor on mats around a low table, with their bare feet going outward away from the table as was the custom of the time . Mary came behind Jesus and emptied a container of ointment called Nard on Jesus’ feet . It was very expensive. It cost about one year’s pay. She poured it on Jesus’ feet and spread it around with her long hair. When the other guests, especially Jesus’ disciples recognized the fragrance and knew what the woman had done, they were angered. They complained that it was a waste of money. “With that kind of money, we could have done something really big, something that would have gotten some notice.”

Jesus told them to leave her alone. And then he said two things about Mary:

First: She has done what she could.

Second: Where ever my story is told in the whole world, what she has done for me will be remembered.

I tried to think, in preparing this homily, how to summarize Ginny’s life, what she has taught us, and how to relate to you here today what she wanted you to know about her faith in Jesus Christ.

First I would like to talk about WHO Ginny was:

In summarizing Ginny’s life I thought of three things that I think describe the center and circumference of who she was.

The first thing is a word from the Book of Common Prayer. In the prayer before the homily is the word is “constancy”. We all who knew her observed that she, more than anyone I know, exhibited a constancy in her daily Christian walk. The vicissitudes of life swirled around her, sometimes more and sometimes less, but her characteristic response to all of it was to trust the Lord, and continue forward doing the next right thing that came to hand. She was thoroughly unobtrusive, she was not loud, she was private, she was almost invisible in her good-doing. But the thing that was unmissable about her to those who observed her over time was that as a practicing Christian, she was constant. Because she stood on the Solid Rock, Jesus Christ, she was steady. Her constancy



was a silent witness of her steadfast confidence in the trustworthiness of God. May we learn from Ginny the lesson of Christian constancy.

The second thing is Jesus' statement about Mary, "She hath done what she could."

Like Mary, Ginny did what she could, and often she did it with very little to work with other than faith in God, a little optimism, and a heaping helping of imagination. John says that she could take two eggs and a jar of maraschino cherries and make breakfast for ten people. When I think about Ginny doing what she could in the name of Christ for people in need, I think of all the times John told me about Ginny using her accounting skills to rescue from misappropriation thousands and thousands of dollars intended to help children in Jacksonville.

And I think about the time when she divided up the scarce Christmas toys she and John had gathered for their children, along with about half of their groceries for their Christmas feast, and gave them to a poor unwed mother who had no toys or food for her child. And this woman then divided what was given to her with another unwed mother across the hall from her who had less than that. Doing what she could resulted in two other families having a little Christmas when otherwise they would have had none. And we know of numerous other times when Ginny did what she could, secretly, quietly, invisibly. Over a lifetime, Ginny "doing what she could" has resulted in much good done to many people.

May we learn from Ginny to just "do what we can" for Jesus, no matter how small or seemingly unimportant. May we learn from Ginny to do for Jesus what we can.





The third thing is Jesus' statement that what Mary did would be told and remembered. Most of the Apostles we know little about after the day of Pentecost. They were the foundation stones of the Lord's Church. But most of them went to their work and almost nothing more is known of them in Scripture. But little Mary . . . everyone who encounters the Good News about Jesus Christ eventually hears about what Mary did. That which to hardened eyes and hearts was a waste of perfectly good money was to the knowing eyes and heart of our Lord the very best that a poor woman had to give. And she gave all of it. She even broke the expensive little bottle. All for Jesus.

I think Ginny practiced her Christian constancy in doing what good she could for the same reason. It was the best she had, it was all she had, and she gave it to Jesus, bottle and all.

May we learn from Ginny to give Jesus all we have. And may we live for Christ so that we will be remembered in a way that points those who remember us to and not away from Jesus Christ.

Now, that brings me to the second part, which is to try to answer the question, Why was Ginny like this? What did she believe that directed her inner compass to live this way?

The simplest and most direct way to explain Ginny's Christian faith to you is by explaining what she said she believed. In the Episcopal Church we recite the summary of the Christian faith as it is expressed in the Nicene Creed. So allow me to briefly explain the major points of the Creed, and thus explain what Ginny said she believed and thus why, I think, she lived as she did.

The first stanza of the creed is about God the Father.

"I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible"

Ginny believed in the one eternal God who is both the cause and reason for everything else.

The second stanza is about Jesus, the eternal Son of God, who became a man in order to die for our sins. It goes on to say:

And I believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God; Begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God; begotten, not made; being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made.

This means that Jesus proceeded forth and came from the Father before all time, before all ages, before all worlds, before there was anything, and that he is of the same stuff as his Father, something like the way your child is of the same stuff as you are, even though he or she is a separate person from you. Your child is the same kind of being as you because he or she came out of you. In a similar but infinitely greater way, Jesus is the Son of God from all eternity, and a distinct and separate person



from the Father and because he came from the Father and is of the same substance as his Father, he, in his own nature and substance, is God just as his Father in his own nature and substance is God. The Son existed in intimate love and communion with his Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit from all eternity. And he was the one whom his Father appointed to create all things that are created, and to redeem that creation when, through man, it fell into sin and corruption.

Jesus, then, is the eternal Son of God and the Creator and the Redeemer.

Then it goes on to say:

That the Son of God, for us, and our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man.

This means that the eternal Son of God became a real man, born from a woman, in order to bring salvation, forgiveness and the promise of eternal life to us, Adam's sinful, fallen children. The offer of Christ's salvation is to all who hear it and believe it. It includes men, women and children. It includes all of Adam's family, the whole human race. It includes all of us here today including Ginny.

The Creed continues and says the Son of God became a man for our salvation. The Bible says that we are all guilty of committing crimes against God and his law. We do it knowingly, suppressing the voice of our conscience. We do it unknowingly because of our ignorance. We sin by commission, doing those things we ought not to do, and by omission, not doing those things we ought to do. And we are truly guilty before God. The penalty for these crimes is death, both temporal and eternal.

As a sinless man, Jesus carried the sins of Adam and his whole family, the sins of the world, all of us here today, and paid the penalty of death in his bodily sacrifice on the cross as a substitute for all those of Adam's race who will trust and believe in him for the forgiveness of sins.

Believing in Jesus as Savior, as Ginny did, brings forgiveness of sins, reconciliation with God, and the promise of eternal life, all through Jesus Christ. But, because he was the sinless Son of God, death could not keep hold on him.

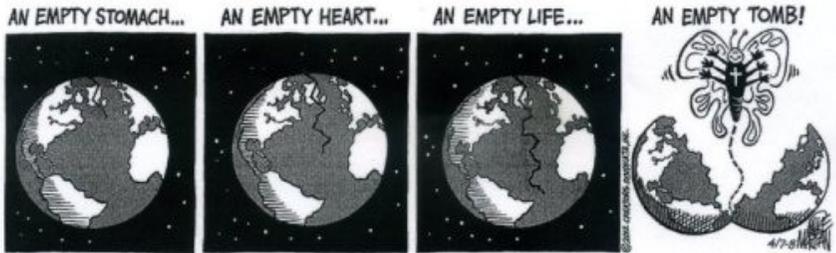
The Creed says it this way: And he was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; he suffered and was buried; and the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures.

This is the most important part about what made Ginny Ginny. It is the historicity of the facts about Jesus Christ. The New Testament documents state that he was crucified under a particular known political figure; that he was certified dead by a professional executioner. That he was buried in the customary way by known, named persons in a known grave owned by a known public official, and that a Roman seal and a



Roman guard were placed at the door of the tomb to prevent any tampering with the body. And that he rose from the dead in such a way that he fulfilled what the Scriptures had said about him beforehand, and he appeared over a period of about six weeks to multiple eye witnesses who knew him to have been executed, including a group of about five hundred at one time. Ginny did not believe these things just to believe something. This is not faith in faith, or faith in something non-real and non-rational or fictional. Our faith is rooted in fact and history that is verifiable in the same way that all historical fact is verifiable.

And that is the secret of Ginny's constancy. It was rooted in a real set of events and facts about Jesus Christ the Son of God and in the real, crucified, dead, buried, resurrected living Jesus Christ who is the subject of these events and facts. And the risen Lord Jesus was Ginny's living Lord, present with her in her every-day life.



The Creed goes on to say:

He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of the Father: and he shall come again to judge the living and the dead, whose kingdom shall have no end. And that we look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come when Jesus returns at the end of time.

Ginny understood this means that Jesus is at the right hand of his Father in heaven, ruling and working all things good and bad, wonderful and catastrophic, so that they worked out for her ultimate good, the benefit of others and God's glory.

She understood and believed that Jesus will come again in glory and raise from the dead all who trust in him to life eternal.

The daily presence of Christ with her, and this certain hope of eternal life through Jesus Christ was the core of Ginny's constancy. It is why she did not fear death. She walked into her illness and all the way through it with exactly the same constancy she had before she got sick.

When she found out that she had contracted a very rare form of cancer, she stated that she had won the lottery, just the wrong one.

She told her doctor that she was not afraid of dying, but that she resented that the process is such a nuisance.



So, what made Ginny what she was? It was her living faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God. And she made it clear that she wanted each of you to know that. That's why I told you.

John, you have told me a number of times over the years that your marriage to Ginny has been one long, pleasant conversation. I tell you on the authority of Jesus' promises that Ginny's death is not a period. It is only a comma. And that the conversation will resume in the not too distant future, in a better world, and it will be a conversation with no end. O Death, where is thy sting; O Grave, where is thy victory?



This same Jesus who is Ginny's Savior and Lord invites all to come to him in faith with the words, "Come unto me, all ye who 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, and my burden is light."

Hear the word of the Lord, "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord; for they rest from their labors, and their works do follow them."

"He that raised up Jesus from the dead will also quicken our mortal bodies, by his Spirit that dwelleth in us."

I am now going to open the service for anyone to say what they would like regarding Ginny. Then I will conclude the service after everyone is finished.

And now, as Christ our Savior hath taught us, we are bold to say:
Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen

Unto Almighty God, we commend the soul of our sister departed, and we commit her body to the grave, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust;



in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection unto eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ; at whose coming in glorious majesty to judge the world, the earth and the sea shall give up all their dead; and the corruptible bodies of those who sleep in Jesus shall be changed, and made like unto his own glorious body; according to the mighty working whereby he is able to subdue all things unto himself.





May 1, 2013
Mechanics



I spent yesterday dispensing some of the charity stuff Ginny wanted me to take care of.

Under the bridges and in the downtown parks, Fred and John are giving out four cartons of stuff she wanted to pass on to the poor. I delivered four cartons of medical supplies to Dr. Downey to use in his mission in Africa or wherever. Memorial donations given at her funeral, I plan to divide among four food pantries Ginny supported...

Lots to do, mostly just the mechanics of her dying. Staying busy.

Like the old joke from Great Depression days:

“Say, Buddy, got a nickel for a cup of coffee?”

“No. But I’ll get along somehow”.



Thursday, May 2, 2013
Goosed



Here's the sort of thing I miss telling Ginny about:

Many kind people brought Ginny either cut flowers or live flowering plants during her final illness; I've decided to create a new flower bed beneath the crepe myrtle tree to house the live plants in a single collection.

This project necessitated a trip to buy potting soil, cow manure, and a hummingbird feeder. I may put in a new birdbath also but I'm not sure about that. I may just revamp one of the old ones.

At the store I parked in a shady spot overlooking a retention pond. Before braving the miles of store aisles, I rested in the car smoking my pipe and watching the pond.

A family of Canada Geese came into view—two adults and three round, fuzzy brown goslings. They moseyed along in the green grass on the verge of the pond browsing at choice tender plants. A family out for a leisure stroll.

What's this?



Another fuzzy brown thing—an alley cat lurking in a stand of taller grass. The cat hunkered down. Stalking. Watching. Ready to pounce on a plump gosling.

The family waddled unconcerned nearer and nearer to where the tense cat hid hugging the earth, muscles tense, ready to spring.

Cat thought of easy pickings. Nothing to fear from a couple of slow, fat, waddling geese. They have no claws. They have no teeth. Just peaceful birds in a pastoral setting...

Not necessarily.

Papa Goose spotted the lurking cat.

From a waddling bird, he instantly transformed into a war machine four feet tall. Running forward honking, wings wide-spread and flapping, head down, neck out, beak snapping, Papa Goose charged the cat.

Startled, the cat flipped backward in the air. It rushed the fence in head-long flight. Cat scrambled in panic at the sudden monsterbird's attack.

Papa Goose ran into the chain-link fence and poked his head through still trying to skin the cat. Then, with the feline threat removed, Papa Goose resumed his normal shape and size, and resumed browsing peacefully with his little family as though nothing had happened.

Oh, how I longed to share that incident with Ginny.

I thought of the Psalm, “The Lord is my Shepherd”.

Gentle, Jesus meek and mild—but when something threatens us goslings. The wrath of God emerges. The Lord descends from Heaven with a shout. Rise up, O Lord, and make thine enemies flee before Thee.

Nothing can separate us from the love of God. Neither life nor death, nor height, nor depth, nor cancer, nor cat.

And here is the joy of Christian confidence in the face of all troubles—nothing can permanently harm us.

The enemy of our soul can do nothing more than kill us—no permanent damage.

Resurrection!

In Christ shall all be made alive.

Guess what?

Someday, I'll be able to tell Ginny about the silly cat and the wrathful goose.

I'll bet she will laugh.



Monday, May 6, 2013
Whales and Minnows

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

I think that's the way it is with troubles. The huge ones, I gather inner resources of strength and cope with the problem. The annoying petty problems of everyday life overwhelm me.

Ginny's death was my whale. I faced it head on with prayer and work and help from family and friends. And, in a measure, I coped.

Now come life's minnows.

Calling the Social Security Administration phone-tree and dealing with government sticky-tape—a minnow in the light of Ginny's death but a whale in my life at the moment.

And during last week's heavy rain, two leaks appeared in the living room ceiling where no leak had been during the previous 17 years. Now I have to think about options—patch, new roof, put a bucket under it and ignore it?

And a huge limb from a tall sweetgum fell on Ginny's little bottle-brush tree stripping branches down one side.

And as I pulled out of our drive, the car's brakes started squeaking... Why now?

All I want to do is mourn my wife, but life gives me no time to think.

Some company wants me to pay for an on-line memorial to Ginny. How do I respond to that? A neighbor paid for one of those things for years.

Speaking of memorials, several people handed me cards with money at Ginny's funeral. I dispersed those memorial gifts among four different food pantries—just as Ginny would have done. On the Pacific Coast, her brother Jack planted a tree in her memory and here on the Atlantic Coast, the staff at the main library purchased a set of murder mysteries with bookplates saying the books are a memorial to Ginny—she'd have got a kick out of that too.

The Patriarch Job said that man that is born of woman is few of days and full of troubles. One way we know we're alive is that we respond to a stimulus—and that stimulus usually is a prod or a poke to generate pain. Dead meat does not jump off a hot stove. Rocks don't flinch when you poke them.

Responding to troubles, either whales or minnows, demonstrates the Christian life to men, devils and angels. Yes, the Lord is a very present



help in time of trouble, yet (Hast thou considered my servant Job) God is the very one instigating the trouble in the first place.

Not that He is a sadist inflicting pain for the fun of it (In all their afflictions, He was afflicted) but troubles give focus, in some way purify us, benefit us, prepare us for future good—and yes that's hard to believe!

What about God is easy to believe?

Non-believers take the easy way out; they should face reality.

It occurs to me that in the beginning God created the great whales...and whales are mammals. They have hair. I'm a mammal; I have hair and Jesus said the very hairs of our heads are numbered---I don't know where I'm going with this thought but it seems to indicate that God is God in big and little things.

Meanwhile, Social Security hot-line plays my favorite kind of waiting tune; I think the ceiling drips are falling in time to the music, minnows swim around in my buckets. God's in His Heaven and, in the empty-of-Ginny Cowart household, things are going on as usual.

Thanks be to God!

Tuesday, May 7, 2013

Fun, Faith, and Mammograms

Yesterday, as we are wont to do most Monday mornings, some of us guys got together for breakfast at Two Doors Down, then stopped at the cigar store for religious supplies, then lounged in my living room to explore the depths of our Christian faith... So naturally, we talked about breasts.

We also talked about Shakespearian plays, and Keystone Cops movies, and burlesque shows, and computer viruses, and vampire slaying, and whether Spencer Tracy (*Bad Day At Black Rock*) could beat up Arnold Schwarzenegger, (*The Terminator*).

I bet on Spencer.

We talked about biology, and Canada, and how much a stuffed moose head would cost. We talked about various brands of perfume and aftershave. We talked about catching fish by hand in Samoa, about Jacksonville history, about Ginny's death, and about riding/driving a segway.

We talked of the old *Batman* tv series with Adam West, and about English comedy tv shows like the *Benny Hill Show*, *The Vicar Of Dibley*, and that hilarious BBC program which reminded the guys so much of my own mother— *Keeping Up Appearances* starring Patricia Routledge.



Hard to believe that this is Hyacinth Bucket, but here is a YouTube link to Ms Routledge's excellent reading from John's Gospel: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kBoAge80pEw> . I highly recommend watching it.

And following that serious reading, like all Christian guys who gather in prayer meetings without adult supervision, we naturally discussed mammograms: Here's is Wes's contribution to our intellectual discussion:

HOW TO PREPARE FOR A MAMMOGRAM--

Many women are afraid of their first mammogram, and even if they have had them before, there is fear. But there is no need to worry. By taking a few minutes each day for a week preceding the exam and doing the following practice exercises, you will be totally prepared for the test, and best of all, you can do these simple practice exercises right in your home.

EXERCISE 1: Open your refrigerator door, and insert one breast between the door and the main box. Have one of your strongest friends slam the door shut as hard as possible and lean on the door for good measure Hold that position for five seconds. Repeat in case the first time wasn't effective.

EXERCISE 2: Visit your garage at 3 a.m. when the temperature of the cement floor is just perfect. Take off all your clothes and lie comfortably on the floor sideways with one breast wedged under the rear tire of the car. Ask a friend to slowly back the car up until your breast is sufficiently flattened and chilled. Switch sides, and repeat for the other breast.

EXERCISE 3: Freeze two metal bookends overnight. Strip to the waist. Invite a stranger into the room. Have the stranger press the bookends against either side of one of your breasts and smash the bookends together as hard as he/she can. Set an appointment with the stranger to meet next year to do it again. You are now properly prepared!

Thursday, May 9, 2013

Trouble In The Camp; Peace In My Heart

I attended court yesterday morning because of a matter which I feel does not directly involve me at all, but involves one of my children. The parties directly involved say I am blind, naive, and without understanding.



I strongly suspect they are right.

I live in my own little world.

My primary crime it appears is answering my phone when it rings.

I asked the attorney to recommend that I be placed in solitary confinement for a few months, but no such luck.

After court, I talked with the salesman at the cemetery and drove out there to visit Ginny's grave site and sign papers related to her funeral (and eventually to my own).

So, I moved from turmoil to peace in one short morning.

As I sat on my wheeled walker near Ginny's grave watching the fountain, fish pond, and waterfowl, I decided to comply fully with the attorney's suggestions. I do not think I have wronged anybody in this matter, but I want time to grieve and I have been too busy with the business of getting Gin buried to give her much thought.

Ginny enjoyed the remarkable ability to let life's aggravations swirl around her without touching her contentment.

That's a talent I lack.

Took my eldest daughter antique shopping Tuesday and in every Ye Olde Shope I kept seeing things I'd start to buy for Ginny. The memory of her loss kept hitting me afresh. I actually started to the cash register one one cat picture she would have enjoyed, abruptly realized that she is not here to enjoy it, then I placed it back on the shelf.

What use have I for a cat picture?

Religious thoughts do not help me much at the moment. Yes, it's good to believe that Ginny is in Heaven with the Lord Christ. But knowing she is There with Him, does not overshadow the fact I want her Here with me.

I think the Scripture most meaningful to me at the moment is the He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.

Where I am, He's been.

Once home from the cemetery, I enjoyed the Social Security Administration's phone peppy tune on hold for 45 minutes, only to have the customer service guy tell me to call back in June.

An e-mail slugged **DANGER** appeared in my inbox this morning: Here is the text:

Today I had to go to court for the restraining order. The judge said that she has not CURRENTLY threatened me so he denied the restraining order. Despite all the evidence I had of the ongoing stalking, intimidation



and using Dad to continue to emotionally abuse/stalk me. Judge Gregg McCaulie saw the woman who said she is "good friends with John Cowart"

My lawyer spoke with Dad and told Dad that he has to not speak with her or see her in order to keep me and the rest of the family safe. My attorney warned Dad how unstable she is and that she meets every legal definition of an obsessed stalker. Dad says he is going to tell her if when she calls not to call again and not to come by. This will certainly set her off against dad and now she also knows that I live near Dad.

I spoke to my older brother tonight and found out that somehow she got his cell phone number and called him to "get dad's address". He says has never given her his cell number. He did not have that cell number when she and I were together, he only has had that cell number since he moved to Jax. In all of the chaos with mom dying he forgot to tell me she called. Which I really should have known for court today.

I want to warn all of you that she might call you. If she was able to somehow get his number she might get your numbers also.

It is imperative if she contacts any of you or if she comes by your home or work or comes to Dad's that you DO NOT open the door, DO NOT engage her in conversation and IMMEDIATEly let me or the police know. I am having to document each contact and I absolutely need to know what is said in any conversation with her. I am very concerned that she will hurt ya'll to get to me. She used to threaten me that she would hurt/kill my family then me then herself. I cannot stress enough how much of a danger she is.

The one great thing that happened today is that while I sat there in court I felt happy. Strange but I realized how thankful to God I am to be alive, to not be living in fear and danger and control and beaten anymore. I thanked God for helping me get away from her alive, for my wonderful family, for my beautiful and wonderful friend who has supported and encouraged me and helped train me to defend myself and who loves me more than she can stand! LOL! I am so lucky. Even if the stalker does ever kill me, I will die happy and free from the violence and pain I took for so many years and free from the shame I felt every day I was with her.

Anyway, I love you each so dearly. I am sorry to have to send this to you all, but I want you to be alert also especially around Dad's house.



Sunday, May 12, 2013
In My Garden—With Minnows



During Ginny's fatal illness many people brought her flowers, both cut and potted plants. For the past few days I've cleared an area around our backyard birdbath, leveled stones, carried bricks, re-potted the flowers and worked on creating a memory garden in her honor. I'm about two thirds finished; the photo shows my progress so far:

However, as I've grieved in my garden, the minnow have been nibbling.

I mentioned a few days ago how big problems, whales, can be faced easier than multitudes of the nit-picking, soul and spirit destroying little things I call life's minnows.

Of course, Ginny's death is my whale and I think I'm coping with that as well as can be expected. But the little things that constitute daily life—leaking roof, ringing phone, buying groceries for only one person, washing clothes, negotiating with Social Security, having a charity return my check—these problems, which are tiny minnows in themselves, get me down.

The most recent minnow involves life insurance.



Turns out, Ginny had none.

The timing of her death fell in between her insurance coverage under her employer and private coverage we bought after she retired. The one has expired, the other would not begin coverage for a couple of months; therefore, neither pays survivor benefits.

Although the new company does generously offer to refund the premiums we've already paid to them.

Just aggravating minnows to me in light of the overwhelming loss of Ginny.

I've been intimate with poverty most of my life so nothing new there.

I sort of trust God. After all, when the Jews faced the whale of wandering in the wilderness, He made sure their shoes did not wear out for 40 years. Shabby shoes are just minnows but the Lord deals with little things too.

But discovering the lack of expected insurance money is a pain (won't say where).

Anyhow, instead of wallowing in despair over impending poverty with my monthly income cut by two thirds, I chose to dabble in my memory garden. It is shaping up beautifully.

A thought occurred to me today as I scrubbed on hands and knees in mud transplanting plants between pots:

After the crucifixion, Mary Magdalene visited the tomb.

The risen Lord approached her and said, "Woman, why weepst thou?"

John's Gospel says, "She, supposing him to be the gardener" said "Sir, if thou has borne him hence, tell me where thou has laid him, and I will take him away".

That's when Jesus spoke her name and told her not to cling to him but to go tell that He was risen.

The thing that struck me is that she thought Jesus was—not a writer, nor a computer programmer, nor a preacher, nor a bus driver—but a gardener.

Much of the time I wallow in squalid sin but sometimes I want to be a Christ-like man.

As the Scripture says, "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus".

That is the purpose of life.

God calls us to be conformed to the image of His Son.



And eventually we will be. As Saint John said, “When we see Him, we shall be like Him for we shall see Him as He is”.

But now, I doubt that anyone ever under any circumstance would confuse Jesus Christ and John Cowart. Not even before dawn in a graveyard.

Seeing me, the lady would have thought she'd just run into the muddy spook of a dirty old man.

Monday, May 13, 2013

The Bread Lifter

When I was a Boy Scout I learned how to toast bread over an open campfire.

First, I'd fry strips of bacon, then tear a hole in the middle of a slice of bread and lay it on top of the bacon in the frying pan, then I'd crack an egg into that hole—fry the whole lot a few minutes and eat the feast.

Not so nowadays.

The other morning I wanted to toast breakfast bread. I dropped two slices in the toaster, pushed down that thingamabob on the side of the appliance—and my bread popped up again untoasted.

I tried again and again.

The bread would not stay down.

I had to eat raw bread.

Obviously the toaster was defective. I threw it in the garbage can and drove to Wal-Mart to buy a new toaster... and here's where things got complicated.

Modern toasters feature a microchip in a computer brain.

Now why a toaster needs a computer brain, I can't fathom. Space rockets may need microchips to orbit Mars, but a toaster!

I read the 18-page instruction booklet that came with my new toaster and I discovered the term “Bread Lifter”.

Never in my life have I ever heard of a Bread Lifter before.

I envisioned a priest in a sacramental church elevating the Host to show his congregation that the bread was indeed broken as the body of Christ was broken for us—but is that priest ever called a Bread Lifter?

I viewed the cut-away schematic breakdown of the new toaster. That thingamabob on the side, the one you push down to make toast, the thing



that pops the toast up when it's toast, that thing is officially named in the literature as "the Bread Lifter".

I didn't know that.

It's called the Bread Lifter because—get this—it lifts the bread up when it is toasted.

What will they think of next?

The Toaster Instruction Manual went on to tell me that "The Bread Lifter will not function unless the toaster is plugged into a power source".

Power source—Oh, they mean a wall plug.

Of course I'm not so stupid as to try to toast bread with an unplugged... Or am I?

I dug my old toaster out of the garbage can and wiped off coffee grounds—why would the old toaster ever have been unplugged? It has sit in the same spot on the sideboard for years...

Then I remembered.

During Ginny's last days before she died, we turned the house topsy-turvy making room for medical equipment to keep her as comfortable as possible. We took end tables out of our bedroom, we removed the bathroom door to allow wheelchair access, we gave away the dinning room table to make room for her hospital bed in there—and we unplugged kitchen appliances so we could plug in her breathing machines, etc.

Nothing was wrong with my old toaster's Bread Lifter; I'd been trying to toast bread with the appliance unplugged.

That's understandable. The toaster always sat on Ginny's side of the table and she always toasted our bread—I'm not allowed to operate heavy equipment.

Yesterday my son John drove me back to the Wal-Mart where I returned the new toaster and explained to the counter girl that I did not need a new toaster because I'd managed to get the Bread Lifter fixed on my old toaster.

She had no idea what I was talking about.



Wednesday, May 15, 2013
Direction, Mercy and Grace

I need to pray again an old prayer that Ginny and I often prayed when perplexed about what to do next:

The prayer asks Jesus to guide us so “That in Thy light we may see light, and in Thy straight path may not stumble”.

Now that I've taken care of much of the business related to Ginny's death and burial, I live at a loss of what to do next. Her death came so unexpected—six weeks between diagnosis and death. I feel I should be devastated, but I'm not. Merely numb.

My most usual reaction in thinking about her is thankfulness. It was such a privileged to be her husband. To this day, after 44 years of marriage, I can not fathom what the woman saw in me. When she first encountered me, I was damaged goods, rejected, second-hand, useless; But for some reason known only to herself, Ginny saw something worthwhile in me that no one else seemed to see, something that I do not see myself. It was a matter of grace and mercy that she came to love me. To this day it is a wonder that such a beautiful girl would care for me.

Now, I seek that straight and narrow path the Scripture talks about... Oh, there it is, dead ahead:



God has a wonderful plan for your life. All you have to do is follow.

Right!

Who thought up that bumper-sticker-religion?

I've heard that it takes time to heal... But I'm not sure I want to heal. I may wallow in despair, but it's my despair and I'm quite

comfortable in my wallowing.

At times I wonder if I should continue working on one of the book manuscripts I already had in progress before Gin ever got sick. Then I ran across this photo which adequately portrays my literary ambitions at the moment:



I live in a state of perpetual grumpiness around friends and family. I snap at people who love and want to help me.

And religion bugs me. I feel as though as a Christian I should be handling things better. So I feel guilty about expressing my true thoughts and feelings as though I'm letting Christ down by being me.

However, He does seem to value honesty, vulnerability and transparency. It's more important for people to see through me to Christ than for me to put up a stoic false front.

My daughter-in-law, Helen, reminded me of this yesterday when she came over, God bless her, to trim my toenails (Yes, I'm too fat to reach my own toes).

Helen, recently named one of Jacksonville's most influential artists, just returned from a motor-scooter trip through the Tail Of The Dragon, a mountain road on the Georgia/Tennessee border which features 385 hairpin turns in eleven miles.

She said it frightened her but doing this trip built her confidence!

Mountain biking, fine-art, clipping Grump's toenails—what a versatile woman my youngest son married! And spiritually profound too; in spite



of rounding all those curves in the Dragon's Tail, she knows a lot about walking the straight and narrow too.

Over a lunch of Chinese food, Helen reminded me that:

Mercy is when God does not give us what we deserve;

Grace is when God gives us what we don't deserve.

Saturday, May 18, 2013

Time To Think

The more I think, the less I have to say.

God willing, I plan to take a few days off just to think and ponder where to go from here. In the all the activity of getting Ginny buried, I've scarcely taken time to grieve for her. I'm setting aside the next few days to do that. God willing I'll begin posting again after Memorial Day.

Saturday, May 25, 2013

Can You Grieve Riding A Segway?

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

Ginny and I had talked it over and decided that after she died it would be wise for me to take a few days by myself in the woods to grieve, think, and reorient myself.

I chose to spend time in a cabin at Blue Spring State Park about a hundred miles south of Jacksonville. The park features boardwalks along the spring run and I figured I might hobble around on my aluminum walker with ease....Ha!

I expected a time of renewal spiritually, emotionally, and physically in the beauty of nature.

Ha!

What do I know?

Spiritually, I got zilch. Yes, I carried my Bible but I didn't even open it the whole time I was away. I understand some people draw solace from the Psalms in time of sadness; me, I just did not want anymore input from God at the moment. He's done quite enough in my life recently, thank you.

The beauty of nature surrounded me; here's a photo of the spring run with crowds of happy people swimming:



I've noticed that my behavior after Ginny's death borders on irrational. For instance, as I drove south, I stopped at a flea market where I bought a bronze unicorn, a statue I knew Ginny would like—then I realized anew that Ginny is not here to be pleased with it anymore. I placed it on a cabin ledge where each evening I watched it in campfire's flicker—a gift for a girl who will never receive it:



Packing for the trip, I brought some treasured photographs I've taken of Ginny over the years; here's a 44-year-old Polaroid I snapped of her as a passionate, adorable, wild sex-kitten on our Honeymoon trip at Yosemite Falls:



As I browsed memory photos, I expected tears. I thought the memory of all the love we shared would make me sad and spark grief.

Not so.

Instead, each evening as I perused the photos, joy welled up within me. Exquisite thankfulness to the Lord Jesus for the privilege of having her in my life and letting me be her husband.

For years and years it has been a source of wonder to me that such a beautiful, charming, accomplished woman would find me attractive, that she saw in me some quality I can't fathom. But for some reason known only to herself, Ginny adored me.

And I adore her.

She made me so incredibly happy and I miss her so much.

But the overall tone of my musing always turned into thanksgiving for the goodness of God for giving us to each other. He must really like us to grant us such favor.

Again and again, I expected to grieve, but instead, I worshiped the Lord in thankfulness—in the dark, in flickering firelight, an old man and his faded photographs of a living love, laughing aloud, smiling, remembering, worshiping, enjoying.

One day I took a boat cruise to view wildlife along the St. Johns River aboard *Eagle II* with Captain Jason, a knowledgeable naturalist, narrating the sights. We saw a good many alligators:



But my biggest thrill came from seeing for the first time a Sandhill Crane, a tall wading bird with the red blaze down it's crown:



Unfortunately, during that cruise my arthritis pain blazed in such agony I could hardly endure sitting in the boat. There seems to be no rhyme nor reason for when the pain flares, it just does when it darn well pleases.

I thought I might have to call rescue that day.

I didn't.

Rescue came later.

On another day.



Damn it!

This gets sticky now. Bare with me. I write to describe my own Christian life as it is lived in real time, not as it ought to be. I is what I is. And I do what I do because I do it. I am a Christian, but I don't always make sense even to myself (Remember my buying the unicorn for Ginny?)

A surprising discovery I've made about being a widower is that I've become incredibly horny. Where did that come from?

Of course, I've always been horny, but it always been unidirectional; I've desired Ginny only and we've enjoyed an active and joyful sex life. Ginny teased that I've become a dirty old man because I was a dirty young man.

Never have I been unfaithful to her...yet, the thought keeps cropping up, *Hey, I'm single now. I want a woman! No reason not to.*

So, I'm sitting on a picnic bench in the shade, smoking my pipe, thinking my thoughts when this woman comes up—a mature school teacher chaperoning some pre-teen kids kicking a soccer ball around the grass field. She's slipped away from her group for a secret smoke out of sight from the other teachers.

Am I reading this right?

Is this woman hitting on me? Or is she just being friendly the way strangers are in a park while spending a week in another town? Am I out of date, or are her remarks suggestive? Has she approached me with something in mind or am I misreading signs magnified by my own mind as a dirty old man?

She mentioned that she might hang around the riverfront park around sundown, after her group left, and that I might bump into her there again.

Does that mean what I think it does?

Here's a photo of a heron fishing at sundown:

Yes, I wandered down that way at sunset for a while thinking irrational thoughts, imagining what this teacher and I might do or say if we accidentally chanced to meet and happened to go back to my cabin to share a glass of wine....

Then I thought: *John Cowart! What the Hell do you think you're doing!*





Get real, Dumbass. What do you have to offer a young woman? You're old, fat, broke, toothless, and stiff everywhere but where it counts.

Do you suppose I was hearing the Voice of the Holy Spirit?

That internal Voice reminded me that while I can no longer technically commit adultery since I'm not married any more, fornication is no great favorite of the Lord's either. Then the internal Voice, which may have been the Holy Spirit or plain, old Common Sense, went on to convince me with one final and overwhelming argument for my virtue and sexual purity: *Besides, Dumbass, the Spirit said, You left your Viagra prescription at home.*

Sexual purity is a bitch.

Anyhow, listening to reason, I left the almost, could-have-been, meeting place and walked up to the spring head where I had another adventure.

Yes, by stealth I stalked a wild turkey.

Florida Cracker hunters regard wild turkeys as one of the most elusive and wary of game. But, I spotted movement in the bush and realized I was near a turkey.

I crept up on the beast with my camera at the ready. Patiently, I stalked, keeping undergrowth between me and the bird. My prey, ever on guard, raised it's head to survey for enemies every few seconds. I froze when it moved.

Closer and closer I prowled. Only a palmetto thicket separated me from the turkey. I raised my camera and snapped. Alas, the wily bird heard the shutter click and ran:



If *National Geographic* needs a wildlife photographer, tell them I'm available.



I'd almost forgotten, but I want to go back and talk about sex again for a moment:

A few days before Ginny died, during a rare time when all kids, nurses and friends were out of the house, I suggested we enjoy sex. The idea intrigued her and she questioned how we'd manage with all the machines, tubes and medical equipment entangling her bed. We got to talking about some of the near-acrobatic antics we've enjoyed in our younger days. She giggled in glee, tickled at the very idea.

She said she was in too much pain at that moment, but smiling happily she said we'd try it soon ...

Soon never came.

Ginny lapsed into a comma. Her last word was to speak my name.

I think my irrational suggestion about sex pleased her greatly. It delighted Ginny to know that even with her disease, even with all our years, even with all the cancer deprivations, I always regard her as my beautiful, desirable Bride.

I thought about her as I snapped this photo of three turtles on a log in the spring run the night before my next big adventure:



At age 73 and crippled weak with arthritis, as I cared for Ginny constantly lifting her to transfer her from bed to bathroom to recliner, my



biggest fear was that my legs and strength would falter and I'd drop her. Thank God He gave me renewed resources of strength to lift her in an elaborate dance we worked out to keep her safe. Now, I also fear falling myself. A broken hip at this point would become a life sentence.

So naturally, when I heard that Segway lessons and tours of the park are available, I just had to try! I told you I'm not necessarily rational recently.

A Segway is a platform with two side-by-side wheels. The base contains a lithium battery and gyroscope features which keep the platform level and upright. The balloon tires make this an all-terrain, silent, mode of personal transportation.

In this photo, there are some Segways parked behind Mason, the young man who teaches people how to ride the machine:





Mason aspires to become a canine officer with the Florida Highway Patrol. He will make a great cop. He is strong, courteous, smart, skillful, patient... with an understanding heart.

After my initial lesson...



Mason led me on a back-country tour of Blue Spring State Park. I felt I was flying! The Segway zips along. Raised a foot or so above surroundings, it gives a panoramic view. The balloon tires enable you to scoot over roots, rocks and branches. The machine anticipates what you want to do: fast, stop, right, left, back; it seemed to read my mind.

Remember that scene in the first *Superman* movie where he takes Lois on a test flight—riding the Segway reminded me of that.... But, notice my cane hanging from the hold-on post:



Now here is a strange thing. As Mason and I rode along an old logging road and through brambles and bushes, I began to tell him about Ginny, about the love we shared, about our happiness, our trials, about how the Lord Jesus gave us joy in grueling hardship—and I began to cry uncontrollably.

This time, riding a Segway of all things, grief really incapacitated me. What a strange circumstance.



Mason led me to a ravine at the spring head, parked our Segways, and let me cry it out.

We scooted back to base, flying low in silent companionship.

It was a highpoint of my trip.

I did not fall off my Segway. I did not set off the alarm buzzer. I did not need to be rescued... no, that came the next day.

That day, I avoided the area where I might bump into the teacher again, instead I drove west of DeLand and rode the ferry across to Hontoon Island, a place I've dreamed of visiting since I was a boy. Back then, the Jacksonville Library had copies of Clarence B. Moore's folio volumes about his archaeological excavations along the St. John's River.

During the 1890s, Moore, a millionaire, cruised in his steam yacht, *Gopher*, along the river excavating every Indian mound he could find. He accumulated a treasure trove of artifacts from Hontoon Island. The river mud there even preserved wooden artifacts including an owl totem pole, the largest ever found on the East Coast.

Sometimes Moore could excavate three mounds a day.

How could he do that?

I don't know if it's true, but rumor has it that dynamite helped pop open a mound so Moore's work crew simply gathered artifacts from the exposed surface.

Hontoon Island, now a state park, contains one of the largest shell middens in Florida and I felt compelled to see it.

Unfortunately, the shell mound lies about three miles from the ferry landing. Obviously, I could not hobble that far on my aluminum walker...

Let's see.

The trail starts out with a boardwalk built up over the swamp.

Looks like a snap, I thought.

I wheeled along a couple of hundred yards. The boardwalk ran out.

Time to turn back said the Voice of the Holy Spirit or Common Sense (is there a difference?)

I'll just go a little way into the jungle:



Lots of roots, vines, mud patches, and deadfalls block my way but if I lift the walker over them, I can get a little closer to the mound.

John, give this up and go back.

I'll go just around the bend, another hundred yards.

I entered a large stand of arrowroot; many of the flowers bloomed around me. Like intoxicating poppies on the Yellow Brick Road:





I pressed on. Thought of turning back now, I rationalized, would be letting Ginny down... Where did that thought come from? Reaching the mound obsessed me.

I met a hiking couple. They asked if I were ok. They advised me to turn back because things got rough ahead.

I kept going.

Encountered another couple. They said I looked beat and ought to give up. “Nothing to see there but a hill of dirt and shells,” the lady said.

I kept going.

I felt I had to prove something.

Oh, here's an odd thing. Among the roots hindering my progress, I encountered scores and scores of small broken eggs. I suspect crows or some predator had ravished a bird nest in the tall trees above the trail:



Next came the really big roots, deep mud, tangles of briars. I noticed some kind of snail shells on the ground as I struggled over mats of tangled roots sweating like a pig.

Up in Duval County, shell middens accumulate where the Indians harvested vast catches of oysters and left the shells to pile up; here on Hontoon Island, the ancient ones must have made a snail stew similar to donaac soup because these snail shells made up the huge midden.



I had arrived at the top of the mound:



In triumph, I celebrated one of my life's dumber accomplishments by drinking my strawberry soda... Now all I had to do was get back.

Well, I started back.

Made it about a half-mile.

A ranger met me. He'd parked his all-terrain vehicle down the trail a piece because it was too rough to drive up there where I was.

He'd been sent by the hikers to rescue me.

How embarrassing!

I'm a big boy now. I don't need no rescuing. Those nosy yankees ought to mind their own business. I'm not bothering anybody. I made it here; I'll make it back.

And the Voice of the Holy Spirit or Common Sense said, ***Get in the fucking Jeep, you idiot!***

In ignominious, rescued, defeat, I rode back to the ranger station where the four yankee tourists welcomed me, offered me water, put me on the ferry boat and watched while I got in my car—and they would not start their own cars till I fastened my safety belt and started my motor.

I suspect they thought I might try to go back in the jungle.



You can't even get old, grieve, and do irrational things without some busybody bothering you!

Damn yankees. Thank God for them. I could have died out there. If I had, I would have missed another highpoint of my trip.

Stacey, the lady who made it possible, is an accomplished photographer who specializes in restoring antique photographs. She coordinates the Segway and river cruise tours along with canoe and kayak rentals.

She is also a reader.

And since I wore the tee shirt Eve, my librarian daughter, gave me, the one with the green alien and the script: **Take Me To Your Reader—All Intelligent Life Reads**, once Stacey and I got to talking books.

Stacey clued me into an antiquarian book store in DeLand and one rainy afternoon I spent hours browsing in the Florida Collection there.





For 35 years I have collected books and ephemera related to Florida history and I always look to fill gaps in my collection. In the Muse book Store, I found an armload of materials to fill those gaps. What a happy way to wile away a rainy afternoon!

Were I to win Lotto, I could spend every penny right there. Another tee shirt Eve gave me quotes Erasmus as saying, "When I get a little money I buy books; and if any is left I buy food and clothes".

I found an autographed first edition of Pleasant Daniel Gold's *In Florida's Dawn*; I already own his *History Of Duval County & Vicinity*, so the find thrilled me. I loaded myself down with many such literary treasures...

And the Voice of the Holy Spirit or Common Sense said, *John, What are you doing? You know your sight has faded so much that you can not ever read such fine print again...*

In swamp or bookstore, I find the Voice of God easy to ignore. I told you I'm not rational at the moment (As if I ever were).

I carried my armload to the cashier.

Unfortunately (or maybe fortunately) the store does not accept my type of credit card. I had to pay cash... As I turned my pockets inside out trying to find enough money, the store owner, moved with pity at this pathetic old man, asked why I wanted the Gold book. When it turned out I did not have enough cash and was about to put several books back on the shelf, she decided that since I recognized the value of the books I collected—she knocked a hundred dollars off my bill!

Gaps in my Florida history collection are being filled, even with books I can no longer see to read.

I even bought a copy of T.J. Cunha's 1974 classic *Swine Production In Florida!* So if you ever need to read about that fascinating subject, I have the book.

And you can thank Stacey for leading me to it.

Anyhow I drove back to Jacksonville wondering how I would feel walking into a house without Ginny. Is it still a home now without her? Or just a house?

How strange to walk into the living room and not hear her usual familiar greeting, "John, I'm so glad to see you".

The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the Name of the Lord.

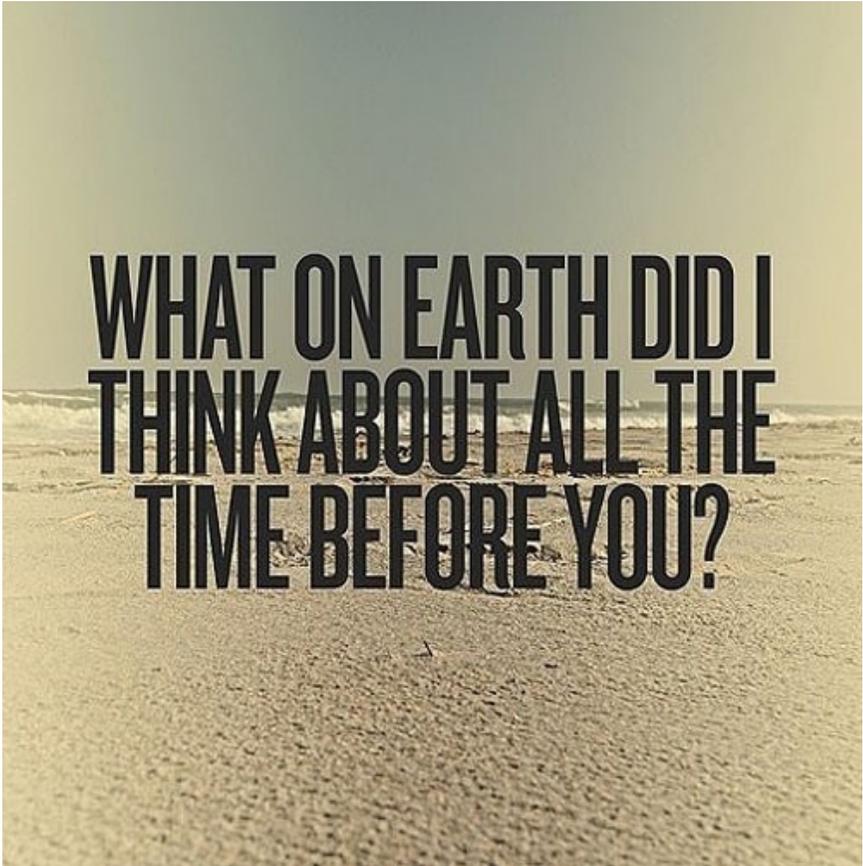
That's true, but doesn't make it hurt any less.



Friday, May 31, 2013
Form Filling & E-Mails

Death complicates matters.

Practically everything I do or think recently relates to the fact that Ginny is no longer here with me. I can't drink a cup of coffee without thoughts of her. My prayers revolve around being thankful for her. Buying groceries for one reinforces that we are no longer two.



And then there's the matter of filling out forms—that's what I did all day Wednesday as I visited 12 different businesses, stores, and government offices. And almost every transaction involved filling out forms:

Name..... Address--- Zip Code (all nine digits)....

Social Security Number:....



Your wife's best friend's cat's name... Annual average rainfall in the Amazon Basin.....

One place supplied me with a 14-page instruction booklet on how to fill out their five-page form. Another office (government naturally) required information from my 1970 income tax return application.

Isn't it great that God doesn't require us to fill out application forms for salvation? His standard is so much lower than the government's. Jesus said, "He that cometh unto me, I will in no wise cast out". The Scripture says, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved". God already has all the information on us required—all the information; No form needed.

St. Paul wrote that if we confess Jesus as our Lord and believe in our heart that He is risen from the dead, nothing else is needed for salvation. Just believe what your own mouth speaks.

Ginny, Bless her, kept our home files in such an orderly fashion that I could readily lay hands on 1970 documents for such information without a bit of trouble.

God, I miss her so.

In every area of life. For instance, without thinking, yesterday I bought two pool floats, one for me and the other for...

The rest of my day I spent answering e-mails:

Dennis, from Newton Abbot, UK, mailed me a copy of a 1985 book, *From The Splash Of The Paddle-Wheel: Tales Of The Steamboat Era* about paddlewheelers on the St. John River. Thank you for your kindness, Dennis.

Cathleen, from the National Park Service, plans to reprint an article I wrote about [Dr. Mary Edwards Walker](#), who won the Metal Of Honor during the Civil War.

Cecil asked about a piece I wrote on identity theft.

And Julee wrote to tell me she's found two of the bronze screens my father cast.

About 1945 at the C.I. Capps Foundry, Jacksonville, my father, Zade M. Cowart, who was a master molder, cast dozens of these bronze grills. Branches of the Florida





National Bank used these ornamental screens around the teller cages instead of the traditional iron bars.

J-Lo wrote—No, not that one—J.L. wrote thanking me for ideas on Bible teaching she got from reading one of [Uncle John's Bible Stories For Kiddies](#)

That reminds me: during our guys' get-together last Monday, Wes presented a reading from Job 28.

Once years ago I taught the Book of Job to an adult class at a society church.

For teaching materials I used a beach ball, five funny hats, a mechanical pizza deliveryman, a paper shredder, an aria from Handel's *Messiah*, a shoe store display, and lumps of coal each one marked XXVIII with white marker.

Where did I find coal in sandy Florida?

Well, long years ago there'd been a train derailment—I walked the tracks collecting lumps of coal for the Bible class.

The black coal relates to Job Chapter 28 because that chapter tells about how precious ores are mined from the earth. The white Roman numerals, XXVIII, on each lump of coal remind us of verse 28 in Chapter 28, a key verse to understanding Job:

“Behold, the fear of the LORD, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding”.

A couple of months ago at the bank, I ran into a lady who had been in that Job class; she told me she still has her lump of coal paperweight and she still remembers what it stands for.

Good of her to remember. Good to know that lesson had some carry-over value. Good to know that people seldom went to sleep in Bible class...

There's a reason for that.

Once, as I was painting a poster to illustrate the Bible talk I was giving, a guy fell asleep during my lecture. Hushing the class not to make a sound, dipping my brush in poster paint, and continuing to speak in my same tone of voice, I crept up to his chair, and as he still dozed, I painted his nose red.



Sunday, June 2, 2013
Ephemera



When I was a boy I once put a penny on the railroad track in the path of an oncoming train. The rolling boxcars flattened the penny into a copper disk.

I could not spend that penny; it was no longer worth even one cent—worthless, with no intrinsic value—but all these years I've held onto it. It rests in my sock drawer under lots of other ephemera—the Greek word means “lasting for but a day”.

We hold onto things that in themselves were only meant for the moment, but we keep and treasure these things as though they had great value.

Last week I began to go through Ginny's collection of ephemera.

When Ginny retired last June, she intended to put together a scrapbook of the ephemera of our life together: ticket stubs to the Peter, Paul, & Mary concert, a pressed rose from a long ago romantic date, brochures of places we visited—and we visited places as diverse as Indian mounds, street dances, museums, art galleries, rodeos, and old sailing ships. She



kept such brochures coast to coast—from the *Charles W. Morgan*, a whaler docked in New Bedford to *Star Of India*, a full-rigged barque docked in San Diego.



Ginny also kept love notes from me and ones she wrote to me.

We passed notes to each other all the time. I'd pack her lunch for work and enclose a love note (some suitable for public viewing, most not). And many's the morning I'd find a post-it-note from her on my computer screen.

What a treasure trove I found in the big box she'd collected such stuff in.

Here is page three of an undated, graded list she made of reasons she loves me:



1 We enjoy each other's company.

1 We have great sex.

3 We are good parents.

1 We worship together on Sunday.

① We ~~are~~ trust each other.

2 We are faithful to each other.

2 We have fun together.

① We are each other's best friend.

2 We share important decisions.

1 We communicate

2 We settle our differences peacefully.

2 We are financially secure.

2 We are kind to each other.

1 We praise each other.

1 We admire different qualities
each has.

1 We are not afraid of each other.

2 We help each other grow.

② We take long, leisurely vacations
together



And here is a love note I gave her:

April 15, 1967

Dearest Virginia,

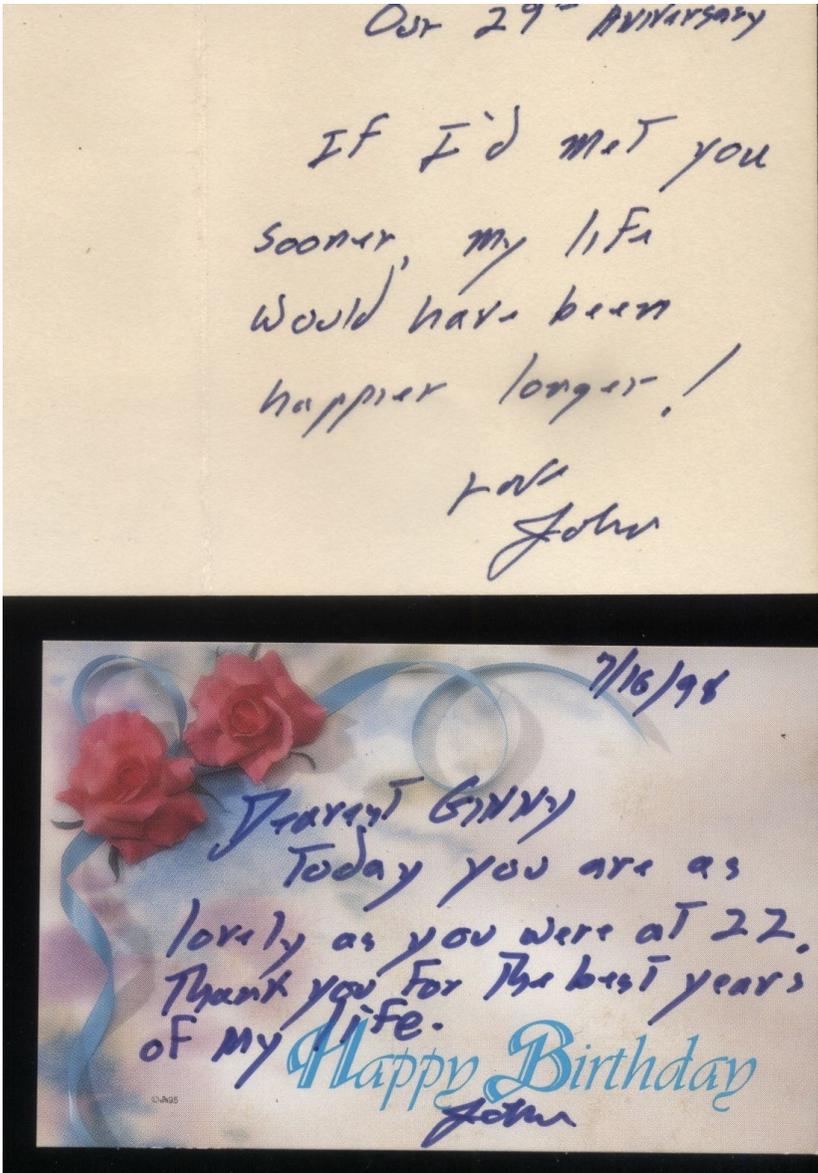
To see you in action is to behold a wonder. You are always incredibly beautiful but last night you were at your best.

I appreciate you so much; It's a privilege to share your life & to share your bed is indeed a huge honor.

Our day yesterday was one of the best of my life. I enjoyed fiddling with the car, sharing meals, cuddling, having lunch with our friend, fiddling with the Bishop's picture, holding you while we remembered loving events of the past — then you topped the evening off with beauty. You hold so many different kinds of joy for me like a diamond with a different sparkle from every facet. Your sensuousness surprises me again & again when after only 21 years of marriage. I am a blessed man & I thank God for you daily. I love you.

Best Ever
John

That note was written 26 years ago; I could have written it all over again yesterday. Not all our notes to each other were so lengthy; here are two short ones



Going through all these hundreds of scraps of paper with no intrinsic value—yes, I threw boxes full of Ginny's ephemera in the trash—made me think of God's love.

We are all ephemera.

We humans last but a day and have no intrinsic value. Dust to dust. Ashes to ashes.



But for some reason God collects people. He loves us. Yet, we have no value but the value He places on us.

No intrinsic value?

Sure.

None whatsoever.

There's not a teddy bear in the lot of us.

God values us for some reason within Himself. Christ thought we were worth suffering on the cross to redeem us. He gave His life for us—other than that we were all destined for the trash heap

But doesn't satan want souls?

No. What would satan do with your soul?

Satan wants to thwart God. He never even gave a hangnail to gain a human soul. To him we are trash. Worthless. He goes about like a roaring lion seeking to devour, but he is roaring at the living God, not at puny people.

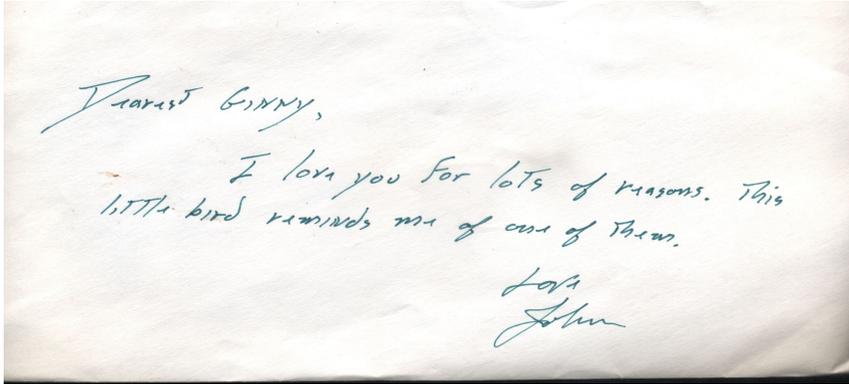
And we can't sell our souls to the devil because we don't own them to sell in the first place.

Besides, the evil one is not in the business of buying. He lives to steal, waste and destroy. When we rebel, we rebel against Christ alone—the only One who values us.

As I delved through Ginny's boxes of ephemera, sometimes I laughed, sometime cried, always remembered, always thanked God for life with her. We lived and loved in joy. And we left this paper trail more or less meaningless to anybody but we two.

Of course over the years we gave eachother costly gifts too. Once she gave me a free Coast Guard tide table to help me plan shrimping expeditions back when we lived in poverty. I still treasure that outdated scrap of tattered cardboard. I would never throw it away.

And I once lavished 33 cents to buy Ginny a styrofoam bird glider. It was Number Eleven, just one bird in a series produced to teach little kids to identify different birds. Ginny laughed and laughed when she opened it. And she kept my gift all these years: here is the envelope I put it in:



And here is the little bird that made her laugh:



Thursday, June 6, 2013 A Storm Like Christmas

As I write this post torrents of rain sheet past my window as Tropical Storm Andrea approaches Jacksonville this afternoon.

In Hurricane Seasons past I prepared for each storm with all sorts of precautions; this year, even as NORAD Weather Radio issues tornado warnings, I've done little. I figure that after the loss of Ginny last month, what more damage can a mere tornado do to me.

However, I did fly my hurricane warning flag in front of the house because so many of my neighbors watch cable tv that it's not unusual for them to not know a storm is brewing. Back when Ginny and I were more active in neighborhood watch, we actually visited each home in the neighborhood to check on folks before and after each storm.

By rote, I also checked my Civilian Emergency Response Team equipment in case I'm inclined to try to rescue any of my neighbors in trouble.



Funny thing: when the Hospice social worker questioned Ginny about what we would do in a hurricane, Ginny, who had the CERT training also, thought the worker was asking how we could help. Ginny said that in the circumstances of her dying, “The neighbors will just have to take care of themselves”.

Confused, the worker asked, “What about going to a shelter”?

Also confused, Ginny, who had Red Cross shelter management training, thought (so did I) that the worker wanted us to help in a shelter!

We laughed when we realized that the lady wanted to know if we wanted to be evacuated to a shelter (as storm victims) in an emergency. But Ginny was so accustomed to helping others that it didn't even occur to her that she was being asked if she herself wanted that kind of aid.

Anyhow, as Andrea passes tonight, I intend to mainly observe on tv as I sit in my recliner sipping hot tea and watching trees fall on other people's houses

My social concerns dim as I mull on grief and death.

Ginny is going to take a lot of “getting over”.

By pure happenstance, yesterday as I sorted more of Ginny's papers, I ran across this flyer comparing Christmas and hurricane preparations:



*Top Ten Reasons Hurricane Season
is Like Christmas*



10. *Decorating the house (boarding up windows)*
9. *Dragging out boxes that haven't been used since last season (camping gear, flashlights)*
8. *Last minute shopping in crowded stores (Home Depot and Lowe's)*
7. *Regular TV shows pre-empted for "specials"*
6. *Family coming to stay with you*
5. *Family and friends from out-of state calling*
4. *Buying food you don't normally buy.... and in large quantities*
3. *Days off work*
2. *Candles*

And the number one reason Hurricane Season is like Christmas....

1. *At some point you know you're going to have a tree in your house!*

Monday, June 10, 2013

On The Bench

Sometimes I wonder if God has placed me on the bench—still on the team, but on the sideline, out of the game.

Apparently my May 25th posting upset some readers.

In it I admitted that I seriously thought about a fling with that school teacher I happened to meet on a park bench while I was on vacation trying to recover about a month after Ginny's death.



I did not do anything. But, I thought about it.

Were I condemned for every wrong thing I've ever thought but didn't do, I'd be serving simultaneous multiple life sentences.

Oh well, wisdom is justified of her children. (Whatever that means).

Although that trip to Blue Spring was weeks ago, two other incidents involving park benches stick in my mind. Recently, as my arthritis pain flares, I spend a lot of time just sitting in the shade here and there.

One day at the spring head as I sat on a park bench smoking my pipe and watching bikini girls swim, a man who turned out to be a New Yorker, approached me to strike up a conversation. He was recovering from a heart operation, the most recent of several he's had.

He identified himself as a Christian and began to talk about the Second Coming and End Times events.

I don't find such subjects profitable to talk about much, so I just listened.

I asked about his heart surgery, and about his family.

He boasted—yes, that's the right word, boasted—that for years he has not spoken a word to several of his grown children. He refuses to have anything to do with them because they are sinners. “Until they stop their sinning and get right with God, I want nothing to do with them,” he said.

I suggested that in the light of his failing health, it might be time to forgive and be reconciled with his family.

He ranted about how Christians ought not to be unequally yoked with sinners and how that until his children stop their sinful ways, he wants nothing to do with them.

The man appeared to feel relieved that he'd found a fellow Christian to listen to him; he was sure I'd side with him in his family squabble.

Now, the whole time we talked, I sat there smoking my pipe so I found his next statement ludicrous. When I asked what terrible awful sin his children were engaged in that he found intolerable, he said, “They smoke and they play Bingo”.

For these offenses, their father disassociated himself from them.

I said that it is more important to get along with people, to be in love and charity with family and neighbors than to be self-righteous. If smoking and playing Bingo are the worst thing people do to offend him, then he ought to thank God.

I told him, (phooey on non-directive counseling) I told him to immediately go to a phone, call his children, be reconciled to them in so



much as possible, before ever saying another prayer or paying another tithe.

He did not want to hear that. He demanded that they repent first.

I pointed out that God the Father always makes the first move. It is not that we love Him, but that He loves us.

The yankee father decided to move away from that shady bench. Maybe he could find a real Christian to talk to further down the boardwalk.

Another day, a hot day, on another park bench, I saw a raggedy man headed towards me across the parking lot; he looked to be zeroing in on a soft touch.

From his shaggy beard, unkempt hair, tattered remains of fatigues, and scruffy boots, I pegged him as a Viet Nam vet—still walking wounded after all these years.

I began to dig in my poor pocket (a special place where I habitually carry the money I intend to give to the next beggar). I expected the man to ask me for change.

“What do you need?” I asked.

“Just a bit of shade,” he said. Then sat in silence.

I waited for him to ask me for money; I did not want to offer any until he asked. So I just sat there, silent in the shade beside him smoking my pipe and waiting.

After about 20 minutes, the man stood up.

He looked me straight in the eye and said, “I am putting you out of my mind forever. I will forget you exist. I will never think of you again”.

With that he turned and walked away across the parking lot without looking back.

Wednesday, June 12, 2013

Six Centuries Ago, Eleven Years Ago, and Yesterday

As I continue to sort Ginny's belongings, I continue to find things that surprise me, things I'd forgotten.

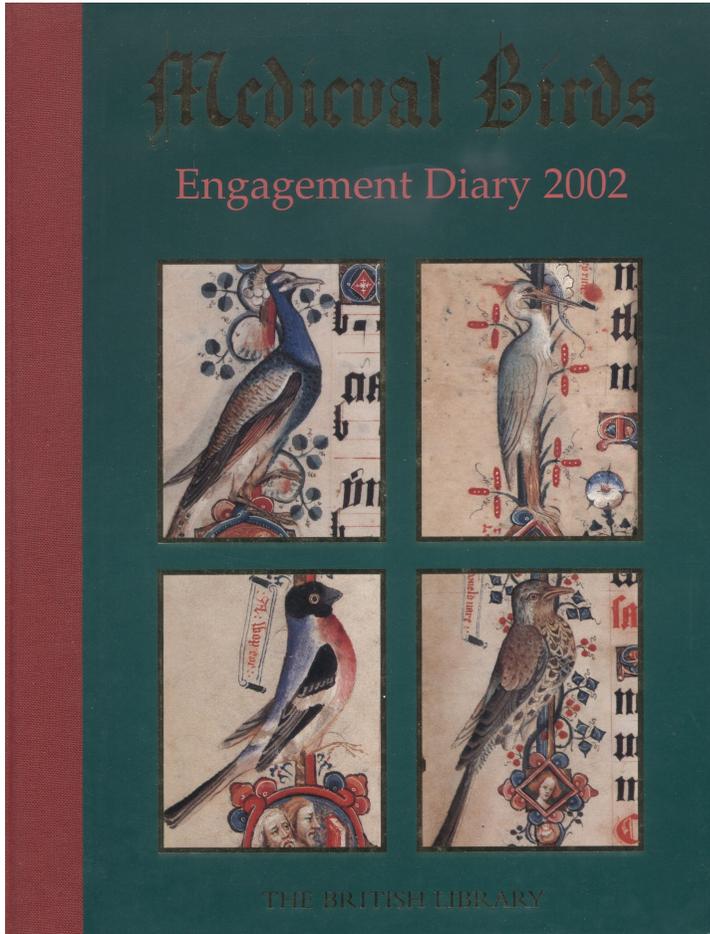
I found a suitcase containing two dolls she played with as a little girl, copies of our marriage license, awards she'd won at work, cards showing her certification in disaster rescue training, Girl Scout pins, a statue of lovers on a sofa with the saying “When I'm With You, I feel Complete”, a rampant pink elephant on a gold pedestal,...



And a Book of Days, called *Medieval Birds* published by the British Museum Library in 2002.

What use have I for an out of date calender, pretty book though it be?

I started to trash it.



Then I noticed something odd—June 11th in 2002 fell on a Monday just like June 11th falls on a Monday this year. Yes, the days of 2002 coincide with the days of 2013 eleven years later.

I decided to mark my own days in this old calender, just to remind me of what I was doing when. Hardly anything I do is note worthy, but I lose track of time and days run together in a blur. And my activities, while unworthy of a diary entry, I do like to remembered without befuddlement.



For instance yesterday morning, I measured a space in Ginny's former home office. I unloaded all the books from a bookcase in our living room, dragged the bookcase into her room, found it would not fit because I had not allowed for some projections when I measured, dragged the heavy thing back into the living room, reloaded it with books—and the last state of this man ended up exactly where I'd begun in the first place.

That's how I spend my days all too often.

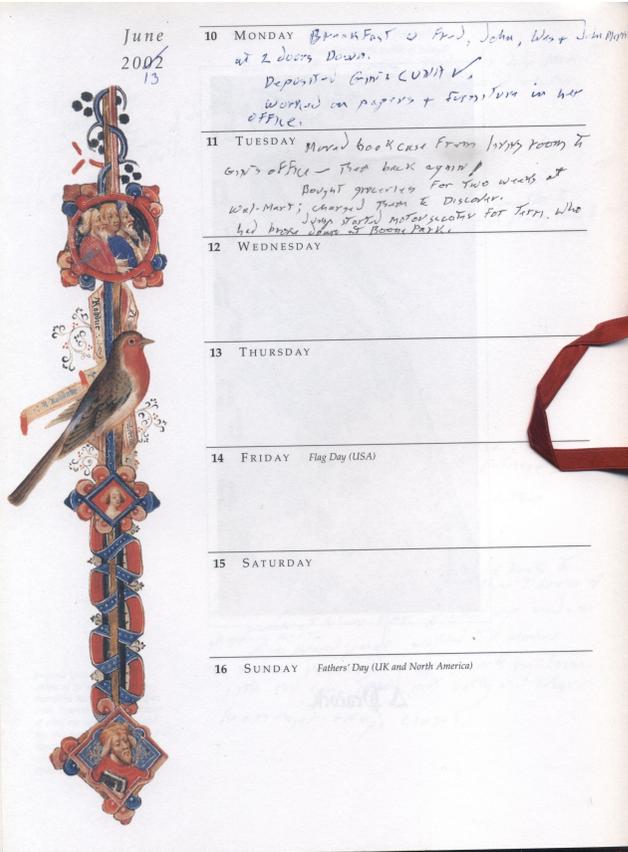
But now I record such triumphs thusly:

Yes, Ginny's Book Of Days reproduces illuminations featuring scores of birds from a Fifteenth Century manuscript from the Sherborne Benedictine Abbey in Dorset. For 600 years these birds graced the velum pages of the Sherborne Missal—now they decorate the record of me moving furniture here and back again.

That's for the birds.

I don't recall ever before having noticed this beautiful Book Of Days in Ginny's library. As I browse through the pages, a line of poetry keeps occurring to me "They tell of days in goodness spent".

That's a line from Lord Byron's Poem, *She Walks In Beauty*; I often quoted this to Ginny because every line described her so well:





She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes:
Thus mellow'd to that tender light
Which heaven to gaudy day denies.
One shade the more, one ray the less,
Had half impaired the nameless grace
Which waves in every raven tress,
Or softly lightens o'er her face;
Where thoughts serenely sweet express
How pure, how dear their dwelling-place.
And on that cheek, and o'er that brow,
So soft, so calm, yet eloquent,
The smiles that win, the tints that glow,
But tell of days in goodness spent,
A mind at peace with all below,
A heart whose love is innocent!

Friday, June 14, 2013
Unbuttoned!

Button. Button. Who's got the button?

Not me!

Not any more, Thank God. Yesterday I got rid of 141 buttons.

You see, Wednesday my friend Brandon set up my Entertainment HA! Center consisting of a tv, vcr machine, and a dvd player—and four remotes.

When television stations and the government conspired to switch our tv set from one that worked to digital format, Ginny and I stopped watching tv. Haven't really missed it except for the evening news.

With the new set up, the DVD disc player remote featured 39 buttons; the VCR, 42 buttons; the tv set, 36 buttons; and the remote for a thing called simply The Box contained 34 buttons for me to push. And every



button was marked in gray letters or symbols on a black plastic case—clearly a revenge response to Hiroshima.

I carefully compared the cryptic symbols on the vcr remote with the script found in *Wingdings II* and found they read, “Go Blind, Dirty American, Go Blind”!

Last year I read a book—James Harvey Robbinson's *Medieval And Modern Times: An Introduction To The History Of Western Europe From The Dissolution Of The Roman Empire To The Opening Of The Great War Of 1914*. Boston. Ginn And Company. ©1916. 777 pages. My copy.

Yes, 777 pages of fine print!--but no buttons.

I also read Stephen King's *Hearts In Atlantis*—only 759 pages—but again with no buttons.

But my tv set has buttons. Brandon gave me a tutorial explaining that to watch the evening news, I only had to push eight or ten buttons and ignore the others. He taught me about Box buttons, vcr buttons, dvd buttons saying that to watch any given screen I really only need eight or ten buttons; the rest are for advanced tv watchers, not for amateurs.

All the buttons and screens worked while he was there. Brandon is less than a third my age and grew up pushing buttons. They work for him.

Then he left me alone with those 141 buttons and a blank screen.

I put on my glasses to see the tv screen, but to see the tiny buttons up close, I must take them off and squint—Off. On. Off. On. Off...

Come six o'clock, I decide to watch the evening news; 30 minutes of local news, 30 minutes of national and world news. The news starts at six p.m. So at 5:30 I began pushing buttons—loud static. I pushed box buttons, tv buttons—more loud static.

I walked over to the tv set and pushed invisible buttons (I have no idea how many of those buttons there are) on the face of the physical set. More louder static.

At 7:45, long after news was over, I gave up pushing buttons.

I said, “Oh dear, I have missed the news. I fear these buttons don't seem to work”.

That's not an exact quote.

There's a Commandment about the quote I actually said.



I arrived at a decision. Since Ginny died last month, I have so much frustration in my life. I don't need any more. Don't think I can stand much more—especially not to be “entertained”. I feel like a baby given a strip of sticky duck tape to play with—hours of trying to get unstuck, untangled, to no purpose.

I want no more frustration!

Yesterday, I asked Brandon to remove all the button-laden devices from my home—tv is gone, vcr is gone, dvd is gone, the four remotes are gone, and all 141 buttons rest at the curb till the garbage men pick them up.

I am unbuttoned. I feel free.

I can read Robinson's book or King's book again because their pages have no buttons.

Yes, as the Holy Scripture says, “If the Son shall make you free, ye shall be unbuttoned indeed!”

Monday, June 17, 2013

Tracks

Saturday as I vacuumed the floor, I broke down crying.

Since Ginny died, the floors haven't ranked high among my priorities. This was the first time I've bothered to vacuum. Maybe one of our daughters has, but, if so, I hadn't noticed.

What set me off crying?

Tracks.

For the last few weeks of her life, Ginny had to use a wheelchair to get around the house. In a short time the wheelchair pressed ruts in the carpet.

I'd not noticed before and seeing them Saturday brought a host of memories gushing back.

Tracks on the floor broke my heart.

Again.

A day or two after Gin died, a neighbor lady brought me a plaque for our garden. You know the one—the poem about footprints of a guy and Jesus on a beach but sometimes there was only a single set. Jesus explained, “Those were the times I carried you”.



As I've cleared out Ginny's possessions, I see more and more tracks she left.

One lady told my eldest daughter of a kindness Ginny did her that I never knew about before. "It was the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me," the lady said.

I removed awards from Ginny's work from her home office. One honored her as employee of the quarter; another named her **Virginia Cowart, Queen Of Summer Lunch** because of her work on a team that provided food to thousands of poor kids every day.

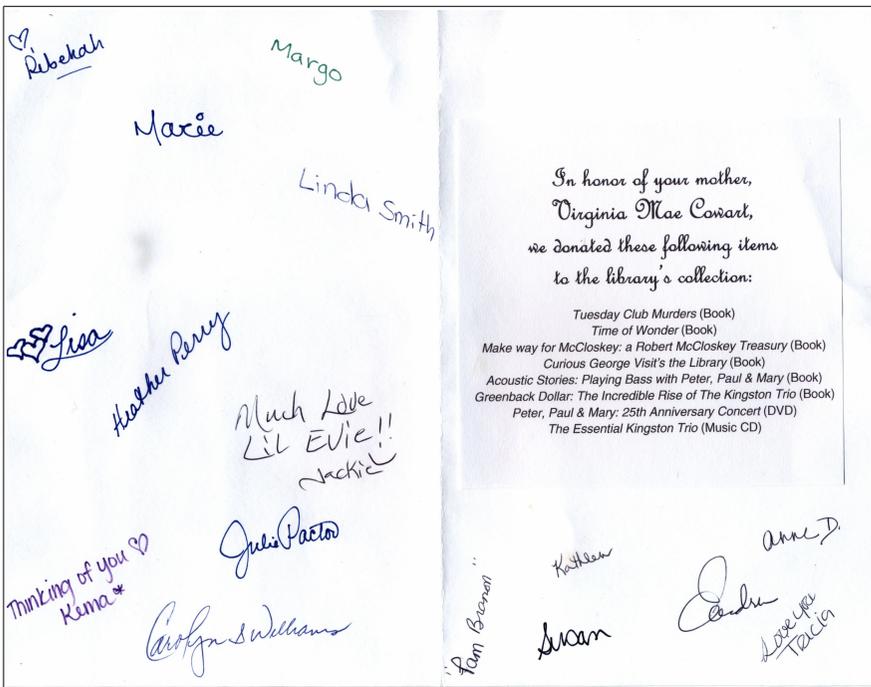
Ginny's tracks remain in places other than the hall carpet.

Folks at several rescue missions know of Ginny because she supported six of seven of them that I know about (Ginny believed in giving in secret).

Another footprint.

Sunday as the family—ten of us—gathered for a Father's Day feast, Eve gave me this card from the staff at the main library:

The library staff remembered Ginny by buying new books marked with bookplates in her honor. Inside is says:





Another track.

We used to have a framed needlepoint (can't remember what happened to it) that said words to the effect:

Only one life, T'will soon be past.

Only what's done for Christ will last.

At the Fathers' Day feast the kids offered me so many signs of affection and respect. They are kinder to me than I ever was to them.

The prize gift came from son-in-love Mark who presented me with a bag of potatoes—No one has ever gifted me with potatoes before.

But these are Enchanted Potatoes, magic potatoes, a whole bag full, with inspired quality. The bag says so:



If I plant the magic spuds in my garden, as the young plants sprout, unicorns will gather nibbling the tender potato buds.



And Voldemort attacks the unicorns to drink their blood so he can stay young forever, but the Ninja Turtles fend him off. He flips the shelled heroes onto their backs tiny legs waving in the air. They signal for help.

Alas, Batgirl sleeps through the sky searchlight bat signal.



All is lost!

But at the last moment Glenda, Good Witch of the west (or maybe it's Elvira, I get the two confused), Anyhow, she descends in a shower of sparkles above my enchanted potato patch and she announces, "Behold I bring you good tidings of great joy, For unto you is born this day in the City of David, a Savior who is Christ the Lord".

And a host of flying munchkins join her singing, "Glory To God in the Highest, and on earth Peace and Good will to men", followed by an encore of *Twist And Shout!*

Thus Voldemort is vanquished and, because of global warming, ends up stranded on an ice flow floating off Miami Beach where no unicorns frolic.

All this I may get from planting the enchanted potatoes in my garden...

Or I may just fry them.

Saturday, June 22, 2013

Nothing New Here In Florida

Thursday my daughter Jennifer reported me to the Grief Police.

I'd spent the day crawling on hands and knees weeding garden flower beds so tiredness and arthritis pain made me a bit grouchy when she visited in the evening. She interpreted that as depression and called Hospice Death Watch Squad or whatever they call it and they called Friday to make sure I'm not suicidal over the loss of Ginny.

I'm not.

I assured the lady that I'm merely hurting from trying too much garden work. Besides, I'm too incompetent to try suicide. I'd screw that up like everything else I attempt and end up vegetableizing myself if I did try.

The Hospice lady suggested that I join a group to learn how to grieve.

I do not know how to grieve for Ginny, but I'm not a group person. So I doubt that I'll join their club



Getting rid of my tv set proves to be a good move. The thing's multiple buttons frustrated me to no end and I sank to leaving it on all the time for white noise in the background. Watching rerun after rerun of *Seinfeld* can't promote good mental health

Many prospects array themselves before me—but I have no interest in any of them. I half-way pray for the Lord Jesus to lead me in the path of His choice; but I can't get too excited about the prospect of God's choice either.

So I pitter in the garden and re arrange my books on the shelves—neither project taxes my creativity, and neither matters much whether it gets done or not. But they keep me from just sitting stargazing into empty space—which is what I was doing with the tv playing.

At least in the garden, when I pull a weed, I've accomplished something.

Speaking of the joys of gardening, under the heading of Things You See In Florida, a guy downstate tried to chase off an alligator by rushing at it with his gas-powered lawnmower.

Annoyed gator bit into the lawnmower, tugged it out of the man's hands, and swam off with it in his jaws.

Makes me proud to be a Floridian.

Sunday, June 23, 2013

What Comes Next? The Ghost of Christmas Past?

Being a Christian leads to one surprise after another.

The Lord always has something new in store for us, some new trouble or new delight—usually a mix of both.

Yesterday marked two months since Ginny died and as I continue to clear out her stuff, in a hidey-hole in her sewing room, I found a Christmas gift, a little bear, she intended to give me but was so ill that she never got around to it.

What a surprise.

You know, Gin and I were married for 43 years but I realize that I hardly knew the woman. We were just getting started in love, and I regret death cut us short.

When she graduated from college, I gave her a bronze sundial cast with a picture of Father Time and the inscription, "Grow Old Along With Me".



That's a line from Robert Browning's poem, "Grow old along with me! The best is yet to be, the last of life, for which the first was made. Our times are in His hand who saith, 'A whole I planned, youth shows but half; Trust God: See all, nor be afraid!'"

Yesterday as I mused about her death, I complained to God that we never had time to grow old together! I felt cheated.

Then, it was almost as though I heard Ginny speak saying, "Don't be silly, Love. Of course we grew old together".

I realized that with me turning 74 next month and her only 67 when she died—come to think of it, we did grow old together.

Just not old enough.

We never seemed old to us.

Love does that to you.



Love does that to you and we adored each other.

I pondered that as I handled her little bear Christmas gift.

One year as a special Christmas treat I took her on a surprise visit to a dump (excuse me, sanitary landfill). I know how to show a girl a good time. That's the kind of guy I am.

Prowling the dump thrilled Ginny as we played *King Of The Mountain* on rubbish heaps.



My Christmas surprise made her happy—that's the kind of girl she is.

For some reason our kids think us weird. I wish them joy.

Yet, I hardly had a chance to get to know Ginny. Deep things swirled within her, thoughts and insights and mystery and charity that surprised me continually.

Speaking of charity and surprise—Thursday the mailman delivered a note for one mission informing me that they had received over \$700 as memorial gifts from people who loved Ginny. And they were just one of



six charities that told me of gifts they had received in her honor! I had no idea that so many people cared about Ginny. She still keeps me delightfully off balance with new discoveries about her.

For instance that hidden Christmas gift, it was a little stuffed black bear with her note, "John, remember the bear grass? I love you always. Ginny".

What a happy memory that flooded me with!

Shortly after we married we drove our 18-wheeler north from Utah or someplace to Calgary, Canada. On the outskirts of Glacier National Park we parked at a roadside historical marker to view prehistoric Indian petroglyphs.

Bear grass surrounded the site beside still waters reflecting the mountains, and as we frolicked amid the rocks and bear grass, Gin discovered giant puffballs and blew scads of fairy-winged seeds into the air.



That afternoon 43 years ago, as we crossed into Canada, we bought a full service-for-eight set of dishes including tea pot, sugar bowl, banquet plates, dinner plates, salad plates, vegetable bowls, platters, three sizes of desert bowls, cups, saucers, and I don't know what all else. Each dish bore a different scene in a Friendly Village pattern.



Well, thousands of miles of travel, years of marriage, and active children decimated those dishes! So, Ginny prowled antique stores for years restoring her dinnerware. Finding a new plate delighted her:



Let me confess something right here: In the two months since Ginny died not once have I eaten at home off a real plate. No, Gin's dishes rest in the cupboard while I munch finger food or eat Chinese out of the cardboard carton.

See how quickly I've learned to be a bachelor?

Anyhow, finding Ginny's black bear with her note about the bear grass made me happy. We have grown old together and all eternity still lies ahead of us. Our times are indeed in His hands.

Tonight for devotions I read the 23rd Psalm from the *Living Bible* translation; the opening words struck me...

“Because the Lord is my Shepherd, I have everything I need! He lets me rest in meadow grass and leads me beside the quiet streams...”



That meadow grass the Psalmist speaks of—I hope it's bear grass.
With puffballs.

Wednesday, June 26, 2013
What Comes Next, I Dread

Tuesday I went two hours early for my Social Security interview; I felt so apprehensive of that meeting. Their ruling could have left me destitute; turns out I feared for naught. I'm still tute.

Ms Ferguson, a beautiful young woman working as an SS councilor, though she asked many questions I had no answer to, guided me through the application process successfully. I broke down crying several times during the interview, so choked up I could not speak, but the patient young woman put up with me.

Afterwards I could not drive immediately, but had to sit outside awhile smoking my pipe and trying to get a grip on my emotions.

Yet the interview proved helpful. Apparently, my income will only drop by half because of Ginny's death instead of by the two-thirds or more I expected.

If I am prudent, I should be able to live on the new amount.

Much as I anticipated the interview with anxiety, that is not what I've been dreading most and avoiding most over the past few days.

The Social Security review winds up the last of the business affairs I have related to Ginny's death. Now, I need to decide what to do with my own life.

I don't have a clue.

The only question I must ask is, Lord, what wilt thou have me do?

I ask, but get no answer.

Circumstances rule out some possibilities—Sure, with God all things are possible, but it's unlikely He will call me to a new career as a ballet dancer or movie star. Or even as a Lotto winner. God has a little common sense; He knows what I can handle and what I can't.

But, even eliminating things for which I have no natural ability or interest, new possibilities abound. I don't have a clue about which one to pursue.

But I dread drifting aimless, feeling useless, taking up space to no purpose, browsing porno sites or watching daytime tv..



Years ago I was commissioned to write a book on finding the will of God.

I could not do it.

I lack spiritual insight to broach such a deep subject—yet, even the simplest Christian gets led by God. In Him we live and move and have our very being. How could it be otherwise? Why do I have such difficulty? Lack of trust? Lack of faith?

I dread finding out at this point in life that I've been blundering all along, fooling myself into thinking God leads me when in reality I was following whims of my own imagination and saying I was working for the Lord.

Almighty God does not need anyone to work for Him. He's not helpless. He is capable of managing on His own quite well.

Thing is, I'm a planner. I look ahead and scheme on how to get things done. I get anxious when I don't see what the next step is. I worry that I should have done this before that and that I should have gathered this equipment or asked this person or looked it up on-line—and I go nuts drifting.

I've heard folks say that, “God has a wonderful plan for your life”.

Maybe so, but He has not let me in on that plan for my own life.

For years and years Ginny and I relied on and reminded each other of a Bible verse in Jerimiah:

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

We have lived by that verse in horrible awful creepy times... yet now, I falter. I walk on eggs wondering what comes next.

The business end of Ginny's death is done; how am I supposed to live now that I've done all necessary in settling her affairs?

What work does Christ have for me to do now?

Oh, I know the answer to that one already!

Once when our kids were pre-school tiny tots, I needed to paint a wall. They wanted to help. I gave each one a brush or roller and let them “help” me paint that wall.

We had a blast!

A messy blast but a blast none the less as they “helped” daddy.



I figure that God needs His children's help in accomplishing His purposes in this world as much as I needed my children's help in painting that wall.

The important thing is not my helping God get work done, but in my having fun while being involved in fellowship with the Father.

Monday, July 1, 2013

Five Loaves, Two Fishes, & A Double Latte

When they saw it in the antique store, Donald and Helen simultaneously said one word—DAD!

Helen told me, “It just screamed your name”.

This happened last week in Portland, Oregon, where hundreds of international artists gathered for a convention on working with glass, Helen's medium of choice.

Her art work was among those featured in the convention's first day opening presentation.

While not breaking or melting sheets of colored glass, the kids wandered in the user-friendly parks eating from over 600 street vendor carts available, and drinking coffee from numerous local coffee roasteries or from the 74 Starbucks shops on Portland's street corners.

And they hunted for a souvenir to bring back to me here in Florida.

The kids bought me a heavy brass windchime in the shape of a Sockeyed Salmon, for which that region is famous.

Here's a photo of it hanging on my reading lamp because I haven't decided where it should go...

Where do you hang dead fish at your house?



Because of the salmon run, Portland, at the confluence of rivers flowing into the Pacific, began as an Indian fishing village.

Every year herds of Sockeye Salmon leap rapid after rapid and waterfall after waterfall against stiff current struggling to get upstream to breed.

And when they get near their goal at the top?



A bear on the bank paws them out of the river and eats them raw.

Bummer.

Is that an allegory for human life?

Since Ginny died, I've been thinking it might be—and King Solomon, wisest man in the Bible, agreed with me. In one of his books, Solomon says:

“Humans and animals come to the same end—humans die, animals die. We all breathe the same air. So there's really no advantage in being human. None. Everything's smoke. We all end up in the same place—we all came from dust, we all end up as dust. Nobody knows for sure that the human spirit rises to Heaven or that the animal spirit sinks into the earth. So I made up my mind that there's nothing better for us men and women than to have a good time in whatever we do—that's our lot. Who knows if there's anything else to life?”

Bummer.

Some kick in his life had the king questioning the resurrection. I wonder if someone he loved died?

I know the resurrection is easy to question. Right after Ginny died, before rigor set in, I took off her bedgown and dressed her limp body in a new robe for cremation. She was not ticklish; I checked. Her death seemed so permanent at that moment. It would take an act of God to raise a dead person. And that's exactly what the Scripture declares happened...

“This same Jesus...”

“Declared to be the Son of God with power by His resurrection from the dead”.

Poor King Solomon; he did not know about Jesus yet. It was the Patriarch Job, who lived before Solomon's time, who said:

“I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: And though after my skin, worms destroy my body, yet in my flesh shall I see God: Whom I shall see for myself, and with mine own eyes behold...”.

Our own death, resurrection, and hope for eternal life hinges on the resurrection of Jesus, the Prince of Life.

Lets face it, If Jesus did not rise from death, then nothing matters. If indeed He did rise after being crucified, then nothing else matters.



Jesus said, “The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live. For as the Father hath life in himself; so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself... Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation”.

Saint Paul puts it this way: “If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation”.

In other words, believe what you yourself say about Christ.

The same night Donald and Helen brought me that brass Salmon (not to be confused with Solomon) I’d just read about how Jesus fed the 5,000 with five loaves and two fishes.

The crowd was hungry. The Disciple Andrew took some little kid’s lunch away from him, and said it was not enough to go around, so he’d eat it himself (when I was in grade school, we had guys like Andrew who took your lunch money, but I would not have thought a Disciple was like that).

Jesus had the people sit down on the grass and multiplied those loaves and fishes so everyone had enough to eat and baskets of leftovers for the next day.

When I saw that brass Salmon, I had to wonder if Jesus had bears working for him up in the mountains harvesting more fish.

Could be. With God all things are possible.

Anyhow, my brass sockeye weight about four pounds, too heavy for a windchime really, so for the moment I hang it on my reading lamp. And when things get too quite in this empty house, I reach over and shake my fish’s tail.

It rings my chimes.

Thanks be to God.

Tuesday, July 9, 2013
Dead Air

In the middle of a tune, my radio cut out.

That happens now and then. It will be playing along fine, then suddenly —nothing. No music. No news. No nothing.



They call this dead air.

Perhaps the magnetic tape or digital disc broke. Maybe a technician fell asleep. Maybe lightening struck miles away and interrupted the broadcast. Maybe a squirrel gnawed through a wire. Or maybe a solar eruption created a sun spot interfering with radio waves.

The trouble could be at the station—or with my old receiver.

Or maybe I bumped the dial knocking the station off the air.

Whatever the cause, the result is the same—dead air.

The station is still there. My radio is still on the shelf. None of that has changed. But the music is gone.

Right now, I'm living in dead air.

The flurry of activities and business related to Ginny's death ceased, was taken care of, or neglected because I didn't want to bother with it anymore.

The house is about as straight and clean as it's ever likely to be.

I'm still here. God is still there. My core beliefs remain the same. Nevertheless, I'm existing in dead air. No ambition. No plans. No spirit. No interests. No energy. No enthusiasm—just dead air.

So, here is where the faith hits the fan.

With externals stripped away, yet I hang on out of sheer, pig-headed, unreasonable faith. Faith that God is good, that Christ is risen, that the Trinity means us well, that there is hope.

Couldn't prove any of that.

Don't need to.

So, at the moment, I live in this pocket of dead air.

It will not last forever.

The music will someday play again.

If not, the Lord sure has me fooled.

But as the Patriarch Job said, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him".

There remaineth faith, hope, and love, these three. And the greatest of these is love.

Thanks be to God.

P.S.: I have no idea why these lines appeared on my computer screen or how to get rid of them.



Wednesday, July 10, 2013
Almost Working

Dracula is responsible.

This morning I uploaded a new book file to order a copy for proofreading.

I'd intended to do this job back in January but life, laziness, and Ginny's illness intervened. The new file contains my diary for 2012—the seventh book in my *Dirty Old Man Goes Bad* series.

When I was a Boy Scout, I read *Dracula*, Bram Stoker's novel written in the form of diary entries,

Inspired by that book, I began to keep my own diary, just in case I ever encountered a vampire. Off and on, I kept my diaries going ever since.

My schoolboy diaries degenerated into boring records of homework assignments:

Mrs Powell gave us three chapters to read... Mr Clements said something about the periodic tables, whatever they are...Aunt Ranna made me memorize a poem. about kissing some girl..

Alas, little could I guess that 60 years later I'd be quoting that same poem at my beloved's funeral.

Unfortunately, I've never met a vampire, but I kept hoping and kept making diary postings.

Maybe I'm dense but, if nothing else, my diaries prove that I have no idea what's going on in my own life. For instance, as I edited last year's text, I kept looking for some clue that Ginny was seriously ill. Both she and I, as well as her doctors, either missed or misinterpreted every symptom. We regarded it all as just another nuisance.

When her rare cancer finally was diagnosed in March of this year, she died within six weeks.

An outstanding event of 2012 was that I had to begin using a wheeled aluminum walker to get around; so naturally the title of that year's diary is *A Dirty Old Man On Wheels: John Cowart's 2012 Diary*.

I'm using this photo as the book cover:



After I've proofread the text another time, God willing, I'll publish the thing with Bluefish Books like my previous diaries since 2005.

Vampires beware;

I'm still on the lookout.

And this time, I've got wheels.



Saturday, July 13, 2013
Good Grief

The sun did not darken.

The earth did not tremble.

No trees withered to the root.

Ocean waves continued to lap the shore.

And most people in the world did not even notice.

Somehow when Ginny died I would not have been surprised if all the above had happened. But her death seems to have caused few ripples in the world at large. It's just my world devastated.

Maybe.

Yesterday Jennifer, Johnny and I attended a class, *Good Grief*, taught by Mrs. Katie McConnell, a bereavement counselor at Northeast Florida Community Hospice, the good folks who helped me take care of Ginny during her illness,

Through the presentation I gained a different mental picture of what's going on in my own mind.

Grief can stultify or it can lead to a new stability.



It is not necessarily an orderly progression.

Mrs. McConnell showed that grief is a natural response to loss and that bereavement is the process of experiencing grief. She said grief is not like a staircase moving from step to step ever upward toward normal living.

She likened grief to a roller coaster ride.

While each of us experiences grief in our own way, most folks have certain common experiences: sadness, anger, frustration guilt, feeling out of control, numbness, yearning... And physical reactions include changes in sleep and eating patterns, lack of energy, weight loss or gain, confusion, absentmindedness, searching, obsessive thinking, and a laundry list of other feelings, she called commonalities.

I felt two opposite reactions to this information:

One, it's nice to know my blundering is not unique;

The other is that I want to feel my grief over Ginny is unique. It seems to trivialize her death to think that I'm just going through the same run-of-the-mill feelings that everybody else does.

Mrs. McConnell advised making list of daily activities (my kids laughed at that because for years I've make huge checklists all the time). She said to prioritize that list according to Need, Nice & Not.

A thing I **NEED** to do today: like throw out that pork chop I've let go green in the frig.

A thing that might be **NICE** to do today, such as water the garden.

And things **NOT** to do today like try again to balance the check book (Needs doing but not necessarily today).

As the class progressed, I began to form a new mental picture of what I am going through—I began to see my grief as a rolling ball of yarn, not as a solid cube.

A cube presents one side, one facet, at a time. I can manage confronting that one thing.

On the other hand, my grief as a rolling sphere constantly presents new tangles (I'm thinking of a ball of yarn here) that get confusing and overwhelming. With God's help, I need to step on the ball and flatten the bastard somewhat to make it manageable.

One of the most disturbing things for me recently is to run into acquaintances who knew Ginny and me in the past, but have not heard that she died.



Do I dismiss them as insensitive clods who missed feeling the earth tremble and seeing the sun darken?

Do I fill them in on the whole story from diagnosis in March to death in April?

Or can I simply say, "My wife died recently. I don't feel like talking about it at the moment"?

One thing that bugs me is that if I say Ginny died of liver cancer, some citizen is sure to remark, "But I didn't know she drank".

She didn't.

But they assume she was a secret lush who hid it well, and I get angry or feel compelled to explain the difference between bile duct, liver, and pancreas, to a person who does know his elbow from his....

Mrs. McConnell advised me in such situations that before I leave the house for the bank, restaurant, church or grocery store, I plan ahead what response I feel like making *today* should I encounter some one who missed the earthquake.

You know what's even odder?

Most of the time I don't think I feel any grief at all!

My overwhelming feeling about Ginny's death is to be so very thankful for her and the life we've shared together I feel a bit excited for her and envious that she crossed the finish line ahead of me.

I adore her now as much as ever, but in a way I'm happy for her and wish her joy in whatever it is she'd doing now.

Guess what?

When I die, the earth is going to shake—I plan to kick off hard as I leap upward into Love.

Or, with my luck, maybe I'll just drizzle away.

Monday, July 15, 2013

Tips For A Happy (or at least endurable) Marriage

Recently I was invited to a wedding out on the other side of the country, 3,000 miles away.

Considering that some days I have a hard time walking from my desk to the bathroom, I decided that a cross-country trip would prove unwise.

However, although no body asked me for them, I sent the happy couple some avuncular tips on marriage.



I'm no expert on marriage. I failed miserably in my first marriage and spread misery doing so. But in my marriage with Ginny we enjoyed a certain level of... well, joy.

I can't say these tips are infallible but most of the time they worked for Ginny and me. And I never met any two people happier that we were for most of our 44 years together. So here, in no particular order, are a few things that worked for us:

Good Will: While communication seems important—we only had one long-running continuous conversation in our 44 years-- there's one thing more important—always assume the good will of your partner. You fell in love and married a good person, even when you don't understand what or why they are doing something, assume their good will. Explanations may or may not be forthcoming later. But always assume they are acting out of a good heart. And let it go at that.

Honesty: Have no secret beyond what you bought her for Christmas. There's no future in holding back truth—well, there is a future in it, but you don't want to go there.

Privacy: You were not born joined at the hip. Both you and her need space. When Gin and I first married we drove and lived in a truck. We lived three feet apart 24 hours a day. Early on we learned to honestly say and hear with out offense, “I love you forever, but I can't stand you right this minute. Check with me again tomorrow”.

Unity: The world, the flesh and the devil seek to undermine love. They present you with obstacles to separate and destroy your love. These obstacles disguise themselves as individual issues—money, other people, different ambitions, child rearing, pig-bullheadedness (her not me, never me)--the only way to survive them is to covet the mindset of you and me, us, against everything and everybody in the world. Address every problem, not as a problem between you and me, but as you and me against the problem.

Say “Good Enough”: Ginny, poor benighted soul, did things differently from the way I do them. I drove her nuts. And she, me. However, we learned to say, “Good enough” to these different approaches to life activities. It's not the way I would have handled it, but so what? It's good enough. I can live with this.

Put downs: NEVER. NEVER. Never put her down. Not in public. Not in private. Not as a joke. Not as anything! All day long the world, the flesh and the devil undermine, put down, belittle. To Hell with 'em! She does not ever need to hear another put down, especially from you, the source of strength and love in her live. All her life she's heard put-downs,



from her family, from her schoolmates, from her boss, from her fellow workers, from tv shows, from the depth of her own mind. Don't play on that team. They are losers all. Bite your tongue off before she ever hears such crap from you.

Worship: Hardly a morning went by that Ginny did not cuddle in my lap, snuggling while I silently prayed for her joy, her safety, the problems she might face at work, the people she might influence for Christ. I always thanked God for her and for giving me the privilege of being her husband. This prayer/cuddle time is also a great excuse to cop a feel. Enjoy your time together in the presence of the Lord.

But not just in silent prayer but out loud, tell her you love her at every opportunity: she will never get tired of hearing that. Praise her to God and praise her to High Heaven in her own ears. Even when she looks a bedraggled mess and she knows it, tell her what beautiful eyes she has (no way to shrug off that compliment).

Sex: Anybody can pluck out *Chop Sticks* on any old piano. The concert pianist plays only his own instrument even taking the heavy thing from city to city on tour—that's what makes him a grand master. That and practice, practice, practice.

I suspect that's why God told us to be faithful in marriage, so we can become grand masters of sex. Being permanently faithful to each other eliminates worries about security, disease or desertion.

Here's a joke from the English Department that circulated around the girls' dorm during my college days:

Punctuate this: Fun Fun Fun Worry Worry Worry

Answer: Fun Period. Fun Period Fun no period—Worry, Worry, Worry!

So practice, practice, practice. Ginny and I practiced for 45 years and a few weeks before her death, we laughed that we're close to getting it right. I doubt that anyone anywhere ever had more joyous fun, comfort, or love than we did.

By the way, it doesn't hurt to invest in a good vibrator either.

Royalty: People over the years have commented on the fact that Ginny treated me like a king. I suspect that's because I treated her like the Queen of my life and love.

Communication: Not what it's cracked up to be. Ginny said that if we communicated, we'd have broke up long ago. You don't need to understand to love. Remember, love is a gift from God, not a reciprocal trade agreement.



Move On: Let's face it. Sometimes none of the above “works”. There are times and situations when you can't just kiss and make up. What do you do when you've made a permanent commitment and unsolvable tensions arise? And they do. Ginny and I went through several periods like that. Only way we could handle such times was not to kiss and make up—sometimes the differences were too great—But we could always kiss and move on—together.

Our marriage was just too damn short!

But we enjoyed a good run.

Anyhow, as you enter your own married life, I wish you all joy and endurance through whatever life may throw at you. Sticking together is worth it.

Wednesday, July 17, 2013
Columbus's Monkey

Christopher Columbus owned a monkey.

Shame what happened to it.

I know something of what that monkey went through.

As best I can recall I first read about the monkey incident back in the late 1970s or early '80s.. Some magazine, I've forgotten which one, asked me to write a history article for Columbus Day. My research for that piece turned up the fact that Christopher Columbus kept a diary available in an English translation made by someone in the 1880s. Further research uncovered letters and papers written by members of his crew.

My notes from those studies have long been buried in a box in a closet somewhere, but certain things about the Spanish voyages led by the Admiral of Mosquitoes (that what they called him) more or less stuck in my memory.

Columbus's monkey is one of them.

I thought about that monkey yesterday as I cut up a heavy tree branch that had fallen in one of our garden flower beds. About five inches in diameter and 25-feet long, it weighted too much for me to lift. I wish I could pluck the thing out of the garden and throw it into the next county like the Incredible Hulk would.! But I had to saw it into small lengths to lug to the curb (with Brandon's help). And as I sawed, I thought about my own life, and about how much I miss Ginny, and about Columbus's monkey.

On their long voyages of discovery and conquest the Spanish sailors of the 1400s got bored at sea and amused themselves in three ways.



One crewman on board, Bartolome de las Casas, wrote that when the Spanish first landed on the island of Espanola, they found the “Indians” walked around carrying firebrands in broad daylight.,

He said, “We met with great multitudes of people...always with firebrands in their hands... These are dry, and fixed in a leaf also dry, after the manner of those paper tubes which the boys in Spain use at Whitsuntide; having lighted one end they draw the smoke by sucking at the other, this causes a drowsiness and sort of intoxication...

"These tubes they call by the name of TABACOS. I knew many of our crew..who were addicted to the use of them, and on being reproached with it as a bad habit, replied that they could not bring themselves to give it up. I do not see what relish or benefit they could find in them."

The bored sailors smoked cigars.

And they raped captive Indian women.

In November, 1493, a crewman named Cuneo boasted about it:

“While I was in the boat I captured a very beautiful Carib woman ...with whom, having taken her into my cabin, she being naked according to their custom, I conceived desire to take pleasure. I wanted to put my desire into execution but she did not want it and treated me with her fingernails in such a manner that I wished I had never begun.

“But seeing that (to tell you the end of it all), I took a rope and thrashed her well, for which she raised such unheard of screams that you would not have believed your ears. ...”

On one island the Spanish also captured a monkey. They brought it on board their ship for fun. The creature amused the sailors as it scampered about the deck and climbed in the rigging.

It amused them for a time. Then they got bored again.

Someone came up with an idea to make the monkey even more fun. They cut off one of the monkey's arms. Then cut off one of its legs.

How they laughed to see the mangled creature try to do the same things it had been doing—scamper across the deck, climb the ship's rigging, do lopsided monkey things—all with one arm and one leg missing.

Since Ginny died, I've acted like that monkey.



I shave and dress. I perk morning coffee. I go out with friends. I visit the library. I scamper across the deck of life and climb the rigging—without Ginny.

The Bible says something about a husband and wife being “one flesh” whatever that means. I always thought it had something to do with sex.

But, with our 44 years of marriage, Ginny and I were a unity in so many ways. With her dead, I shave differently. I make coffee differently. I garden with half of me gone. We used to always discuss whether this plant needed more sun or should be moved into a shadier spot. I'd ask her if this green thing was a flower or a weed. What kind of bird is that? Can this go another day without watering?

She's not here to talk with about such important matters.

Everything in my life seems lopsided now.

I don't even pray the way I used to.

My core beliefs remain the same, but they hardly seem important anymore.

The doctrine stands firm: Christ crucified; Christ risen; Christ coming.

So what?

How am I supposed to keep climbing the rigging?

To outsiders I appear to be coping well, still doing monkey things—but with something internal missing. God, I love her so!

However. My Bible reading tonight said, “It is God Himself who has made us what we are and given us new lives from Christ Jesus; and long ages ago He planned that we should spend these lives in helping others”.

Lord, need any help from a lopsided, one-legged monkey? I'm available.

Don't know why, but I am. Don't know what a 74-year-old one-armed monkey can do for the kingdom of God, but, even though it looks ridiculous, I'll try to help. You Lord, have hard-wired us Christians that way.

Remember, Lord Jesus,, it was not all that unusual for Ginny to call me her hero, her knight in shining armor.

She even kept this statue of me on her bookshelf:



Yes, Ginny thought well of me.

My own favorite Super Hero is the Incredible Hulk. I even own two tee shirts with his picture on my chest.

I think it would be neat when something frustrates me—like a fallen log in the flower bed—to turn into a giant green muscle man, uproot the tree, and hurl it into the next county!

Once when I expressed such an idea to Ginny, she said, “John, when you get upset, you don't turn green. You just turn into the Incredible Sulk”.

Maybe so, but, in my present circumstances, I'm just trying not to altogether turn into a modern version of Columbus's monkey.

Wednesday, July 24, 2013

Monkey In A Murky Mirror

Monday marked three months since Ginny died and my roller-coaster ride of emotions continues, especially in the light of what Dr. Oz told me yesterday.

When my daughter Eve read my previous posting, the one about Columbus's monkey, she bought me a gift from a shop in Fernandina Beach:



Yes, it is a brass monkey studying himself in a looking glass; a circle of mirror set in the brass reflects that monkey's face:

Does that remind you of anyone?

Eve says I engage in too much introspection, mostly unnecessarily negative.

While a certain amount of self examination may be healthy, I may over do it a trifle. Sometimes I think the world and all its problems hinges on me and I'm to blame.

For instance, most of the time, my predominant thought concerning my life with Ginny revolves around how thankful I am for the privilege of being her husband for 44 years, and I thank God for the wonderful life we enjoyed.

Yes, sometimes I weep for her and often I laugh at happy memories, and I long to tell her about funny or interesting things things I saw during a day. And I miss our happy sex life; she always made me feel like the greatest lover since Casanova...But recently I've begun to reexamine the medical events around her death and I've been feeling guilty that I may have made some mistake in her care. I review my extensive notes on every injection, every change in medication, every event to see if I should have done something, anything, different as her primary care



giver. I wonder if I misunderstood some instruction from the team of doctors and nurses supervising her care.

And I find no fault in what we all did for her.

Yet, undifferentiated guilt seeps into my thinking.

What a crock!

She could have had no better care by anyone anywhere. So why do I feel guilty?

Because I forget just how good things were.

The Apostle James said, "Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass (the word the Bible uses for *mirror*) : For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was. But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed".

Yes, I tend to forget good things and only remember negative.

I need to refocus. To refocus on love.

Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there the heart is free to love.

St. Paul said, "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord".

Does my brass monkey have an open face? honestly looking for the Lord, not into the dark places of his own heart?

In the Bible's Love Chapter, I Corinthians 13, Paul said, "Now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known".

What a great prospect. We shall see, not our own dim reflection but the face of God Himself, the face we have always yearned to see smiling at us.

Yesterday, Dr. Oz, my oncologist, said my psa reading is only 57, just double what it was last year. He says my prostate cancer has not metastasized yet and that I'm likely to live for a couple of years still, at least I'm not threatened by that cancer.

I felt disappointed at that news. Ginny and I always assumed I'd be the one to die first. The world seems out of kilter with her dead and me left



to go on. I'd half-way hoped my own cancer would cooperate and I'd leave for Home soon. No such luck.

I'm here still and I'm in the process of deciding what kind of person I am and what the Lord wants me to do or be in my remaining time, which may be for years.

Since Dr. Oz foresees that I am not in the Homestretch yet, after I talked with him, I pulled out my planning calendar to plot, God willing, decisions, work, purchases, etc. that I'd been putting off.

Incidentally, Dr. Oz told me that he's never before seen patients with a healthier, happier, more loving world-view than what he detected in Ginny and me. I'm not sure what he saw in us, but what a nice compliment!

My faith, my joy, my responsibilities were not wrapped up solely in Ginny. She was my helpmate, and I hers, but I'm now the one who needs to live out my life. And my main question, like that of all Christians, remains, "Lord, what wilt Thou have me do"?

But what about all my survivor's guilt and negative feelings and introspection? Well, I think it was King Solomon who observed that the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked, Who can know it?

If I can't trust my own heart, who can I trust? St. John address that very question. He said, Beloved, "Hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before God. For if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things. Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God".

So, no matter what my introspection, negative thoughts, sins, misgivings, guilt—no matter what my mirror shows me, no matter what unrealistic pictures my mind dredges up, no matter what my heart says...

Anything less than confidence in God is just monkey business.



Thursday, July 25, 2013
In A Movie

Yesterday an e-mail from Rich Swingle at the Helen Hayes Theatre in New York, brought news that an article I wrote in the early 1980s contributed some background material for a movie.

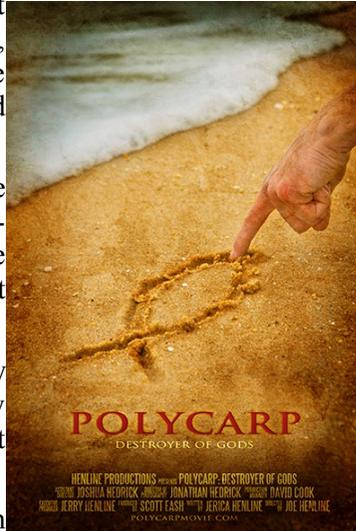
Filmmakers Joe and Jerica Henline have produced the story of Polycarp, an 86-year-old Christian burned alive in the arena by pagan Romans during the First Century.

The Psalmist said of godly people, "They shall still bring forth fruit in old age; they shall be fat and flourishing; To shew that the LORD is upright".

Elderly Polycarp continues to bring forth fruit 2,000 years after he refused to deny Christ as pagans jeered and set him on fire. In his old age, he demonstrated to the mob at the stadium and to generations following that the Lord is upright.

That's what old age is all about.

That's what our life at any age is all about.





As I understand the Henline press release, the Polycarp movie will be screened during next year's Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia.

More information about the movie can be found at him: <http://henlineproductions.com>.

And my article, *The Day They Killed Polycarp*, can be read at <http://www.cowart.info/John%27s%20Books/Polycarp/polycarp.htm>

Sunday, July 28, 2013

Roll Credits

The folks making that film about Polycarp I mentioned in my last post have invited me to visit their movie set, meet the actors, and see how it's done.

I'm unable to travel so I had to miss out on that adventure.

However, this incident sparked some thoughts about my own role in life now that Ginny has died. I visited her grave yesterday morning, then during a heavy thunderstorm in the afternoon I sat under our redneck gazebo listening to the rain on the roof, sipping coffee, smoking my pipe, and remembering many happy times in love which Ginny and I enjoyed over the years

While she was ill, being her caregiver defined my life.

Then when she died, I no longer could think of myself in that capacity. What am I now? What role do I play in the kingdom of Christ? Where do I go from here? Who am I and what am I supposed to do now that the curtain has fallen on the love story that has been my life for the past 45 years?

As I mulled and prayed about such things in the thunderstorm, I also thought in terms of that movie, or any movie in a theater.

Ok, the love story on screen has ended, the credits roll, the houselights come up, the audience files out. The theater empties.

Now what?

Now comes the janitor (that's me). He flips up the seats. He looks the place over. He sweeps up debris—scattered popcorn on the floor, Raisinet boxes, a limp condom now and then, drink cups. Every once in a while he finds a coat draped over a seat, a forgotten hat, or a pair of sunglasses dropped from a pocket.

He's getting ready for the next show.

I see myself as that janitor recently. I've cleared debris, swept up, taken care of outstanding bills, distributed clothes and household goods



Actually, Ginny left very little for me to take care of. When she learned the cancer was terminal, she straightened out our affairs wonderfully; she took such good care of me.

The bronze marker (it's not installed yet) on her grave will read "**She hath done what she could**".

Jesus said that about a woman who loved and served Him. It fits Ginny's life.

My own marker to go beside hers will read:

My life was a love story.

That fits too.

So meanwhile, I continue to sweep up getting ready for the next act.

But this stage of my life is not at all dreary drudgery; there is some joy—every once in a while, Thanks be to God, I find a few delicious Raisinets still left in a box.

Tuesday, July 30, 2013

About Love

Recently I've thought a lot about love.

Such thinking led me to remembering.

So here is an entry concerning love from my diary written on February 15th, 2009:

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

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

Nicole, one of the waitresses at Dave's, gave us a cute Valentine card. She didn't feel the printed message was appropriate for us so she had erased it and amended the saying. She called us "lovebirds". She often calls us that.

Lovebirds?

Unconscious of our behavior; we just do what's normal to us.

Being in love is normal.



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

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

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

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

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

We were too naïve to give up.

Looking back, I wonder why we didn’t.

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

Bad times.

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

I understand where she was coming from.

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

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

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

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

Bad times.

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

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

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



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

Amazing!

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

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

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

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

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

Talk about the grace of God!

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

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

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

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

These three kids appear incredibly bright. Even the 18-month-old baby shines with intelligence and motor dexterity. She has better balance than I do—My arthritis pained me fierce and I shook and wobbled



something awful; but nothing wrong with me that the resurrection won't fix.

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

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

Jason and Colette (we were meeting them for the first time) had read my book [*A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad*](#) and had nice things to say which gave me a lift. Jason remarked, "I liked the jokes; she was interested in that religious stuff".

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

Then came time to drive home.

The plot thickens:

It was a dark and stormy night...

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

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

"Turn right," I said.

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

"Go west," I said.

"It's east," she said.

"Now, go straight," I said.

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

"Turn left at the..."

See where this is going?

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



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

Louder and louder, we discussed our directions.

Aggravated

Frustrated.

Confused.

Tired.

Lost.

We grew angry and yelled at eachother.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Wednesday, July 31, 2013
An Irrational Armload Of Books

Probably no one has noticed, but occasionally, since Ginny died, I do things that are not exactly rational.



For instance yesterday I bought an armload of Florida History books at Chamblin's Bookmine a place I've spent many happy hours over the years. While browsing the shelves, I enjoyed talking with the owner, Ron Chamblin. Back in the early '70s I was his first customer when I bought a five volume set of Samuel Pepys diary; As I drove past his yet-to-be-opened store on Herschel Street, I saw Ron inside shelving books. I tapped on the glass, he let me in, and ...

We've enjoyed talking every month or so ever since.

However, it makes no sense for me to buy more Florida history books at this stage of my life. I have trouble reading small print and I doubt that I'll be able to read the books I already own. But I craved filling gaps in my hefty Florida History library.

So rational or not, I enjoyed buying those books.

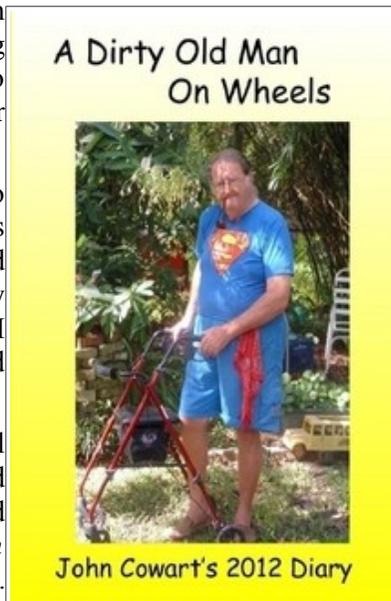
From my own shelves, I've been studying exercises in a motivational book, making lists of my assets and liabilities. Care to guess which list is longer.

But this activity helps me refocus on what I really want in my remaining days, be they few or many. I aim to live and enjoy life purposefully rather than drift like a leaf circling the drain.

And yes, Ginny was the source of so much of my happiness, but she was not the only source. We loved together by choice rather than only neurotic need. She adored me and I treasured her, yet we each stood complete within ourselves.

Anyhow, speaking of irrational things, this morning I published number eight of my published diaries-- *A Dirty Old Man On Wheels: John Cowart's 2012 Diary*. I'd intended to publish this book back in January but life and Ginny's illness intervened.

So all those long lines of people who have huddled on the sidewalks since January waiting for my book to become available, can now shake out the kinks, take out their credit cards, buy their copy of my book, and finally go home to get a bath.





For those who have not stood in line since January, A Dirty Old Man On Wheels can be found on the 8th page of my www.bluefishbooks.info online book catalog,

Monday, August 5, 2013

Ginny's Permanent Marker

Friday, Jason Nowakowski, family service counselor at Riverside Memorial Park, phoned to tell me Ginny's Permanent bronze marker had been installed. As I'd asked beforehand, Jason saved the temporary plastic marker for me to bring home to place in the memory garden I planted for her in our backyard.

First thing Saturday I drove out to the cemetery to examine the bronze plaque and think about memorials.



The inscription I chose for Ginny comes from Mark's Gospel; Jesus said this about the woman who washed His feet and dried them with her long hair. It is the highest accolade for any person in the Bible. It fits Ginny so well.

My own plaque , already on order save for the end date, will read, “My life was a love story”. That fits well too.



Here is a photo of the area surrounding her grave site, a niche in the memorial wall (that's my walker parked in the shade):

The land slopes down from the wall to Memory Lake with its fountain:



When I chose the spot and paid for our niches, I snapped photos and made a slideshow so Ginny could see where our ashes will reside till Christ calls us from the grave.

By then she felt too ill to visit the site with me. But she said that it looks like the sort of spot where we'd enjoy sitting in the shade, smoking and talking for hours as we watched wading birds prowl the shoreline of the little lake.





She said she was pleased with the arrangements I made for us to occupy adjacent pigeonholes—that was the accountant in her talking. God, I miss her so.

When I think of memorials, I remember Shelly's poem, *Ozymandias*:

*I met a traveller from an antique land
 Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
 Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
 Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
 And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
 Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
 Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
 The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed:
 And on the pedestal these words appear:
 "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
 Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
 Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
 Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
 The lone and level sands stretch far away*

I think of the graves and memorial stones mentioned in the Bible and how some mighty prophet's grave had been forgotten till they tried to bury another dead guy on top of him.

The site which pilgrims see of the supposed tomb from which Jesus arose is pure speculation founded on a tradition that developed hundreds of years later when Constantin's mother saw visions of historic places..



It's reasonable that the spot of the tomb of Jesus would be forgotten. That's reasonable. Who'd pay a bit of attention to an empty hole in the ground when the living Lord was standing right there before people's eyes with the nail prints still in His hands?

The abandoned grave means nothing to Christians, it is the risen Christ that counts. And the stone that sealed His tomb became just another big rock when He walked out.

Yes, neither stones, nor statues nor bronze plaques make "permanent" memorials to the dead.

We live our own memorials.

We are living stones.

Again and again since she died, have I met or heard of people whose lives were made better by contact with my wife. I know I am not the person I was before I met her. Our children carry on consistent acts of kindness and charity because that's the way Ginny raised 'em.

In time, lakes drain away and "permanent" markers, even granite, marble, or bronze ones corrode and crumble away.

Love doesn't.





Tuesday, August 6, 2013
Happy. Happy. Joy. Joy.

I awoke at 4 a.m. as usual feeling unusual.

For one thing, I was not in pain. Thanks be to God this is one of the rare days when my arthritis is not hurting; that means I'm not likely to be as grumpy as usual today.

But another feeling permeates this morning—I feel happy. So happy in fact that I got right to work cataloging those Florida History research books I bought last week. And by 8:30 I'd scanned 59 volumes into my computer's bibliographic file. That's some kind of work record for my recent days.

OK, I'm simple. Doesn't take much to make me happy. But a lot of things recently contribute to this unusual euphoria.

For one thing as I worked sorting research materials, it astounded me to realize how many of the authors I have met and talked with over the years, some famous, some enthusiasts like me. Most are dead now but I have shared interests and I have loved, and been befriended by many interesting people. That startled me when I realized it this morning.

The Bible says that as God leads us, we shall “stand before Kings”. Notice that it does not say we may stand before them as equals.

Many times over the years I have met important people by “chance”—what I imagine was a God-engineered chance.

I can't remember how many times I've huddled under an awning in a rainstorm seeking a dry place to smoke my pipe when a CEO, or civic leader, or famous author broke for coffee in that same time-frame and came to seek shelter from smoke-free buildings (an abomination before the Lord) under that same awning.

Other times while researching an article I've called such people with questions and they treated me with great courtesy—and even on a few occasions, they have called me with questions on some esoteric point. Sometimes, I actually knew an answer!

What fun I've had in what to others might seem a mundane uneventful life.

Another thing that makes me happy this morning is that I'm moving ahead with tentative plans for various life changes.

In evaluating myself (Remember that brass monkey Eve gave me) in evaluating myself, I find that I have some capacity for loving others, I have a sense for minor adventures, I care deeply about a lot of things.



Except while waiting to renew a driver's license or something of that sort, I've never been bored a day in my life.

And I've enjoyed such a good life all things considered.

Yes, I adored and treasured Ginny. We made each other happy, But neither of us was the only source of happiness in life. We soared together like two separate hawks riding the same updraft—together, yet independent in love.

Recently I have been accomplishing things that make me uncomfortable and I would have avoided in the past. Even things I want to do come hard for me. For instance I had to steel-myself to shop for these history books because I felt so shy about it. And I'm learning to talk with the bank vice-president and ask financial questions. And yesterday I spoke with a pharmacist and renewed some of my prescriptions—in the past when one bottle ran out, I just would not take that medicine any longer. I've even attended church services a time or two, a thing that makes me antsy.

My comfort zone remains at home while I forge out into the big wide scary world of people. I think I was born to be a turtle living in my own little shell.

Reminds me, While essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson visited Florida, he remarked, "All the thoughts of a turtle are turtle".

It's just that we human turtles fear hurt.

So, now that I checked with the oncologist last week and he estimates that

I have a few more good miles to add on the odometer, I'm in the process of discerning where to go from here. And so many options lie ahead in life that they excite me.





Nothing radical. I'm unlikely to take up sky-diving, but I may walk around the block a little more often.

One thing about enjoying life with Jesus as Lord, is that He is called the Deliverer—and what does a delivery man do?

He takes something from where it is to where it ought to be.

He takes me from where I am this moment toward where I ought to be, where I want to be, wherein lieth Joy.

In the course of my usual Bible reading this morning, I ran across a passage I love from the Prophet Jeremiah--"I know the plans I have for you, saith the Lord. They are plans for good and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope".

So, this morning I feel happy, happy, happy.

It may be that I'm on the upside of the rollercoaster of Ginny's death. Or it may be that I'm just tickled with the addition of books to my Florida History shelves—especially the volumes I picked up of eye-witness accounts from the Seminole War of 1842 (I'm working on a book set in that time-period).

It may be that I'm just slap-happy from being in pain for so long and to wake up not hurting today—but this morning I am happy. So happy in fact that I'll tell the joke Wes told the gang yesterday:

Two sweet young things, strangers out camping, saw each other from opposite sides of the lake.

One girl called to the one on the far shore, "How do I get to the other side"?

The girl on the far shore pondered the problem then yelled back, "But you **are** on the other side".

Wednesday, August 7, 2013
Love, Time, and Flying Saucers

Yesterday morning ,officials from the Florida Lottery phoned to let me know I've won this week's 47 million dollar jackpot.... Not only that, but this beautiful woman phoned to say how she craved my body with insatiable lust.

Alas, I missed both phone calls because my cell phone was disconnected.

When I dialed any number, Ma Bell's recorded message said my service had been cut off because of lack of payment.

Not my lack of payment, I pay my bills mostly on time.



But my new cell phone links to the family plan of one of my children and they pay the monthly bill. But if they forget, my cell phone gets axed.

I lovingly reminded my child and within minutes the bill was paid and I'm again in contact with the outside world.

So, Lotto officials and beautiful woman, your call is important to me, please call again. Operators are standing by to take your call.

That glitch started my day which turned out to be another good day in a string of recent good days filled with things that interest me (aside from Lotto and a beautiful woman).

Be that as it may, I've spent much time thinking about love.

It's more than sentimentality, although that's nice.

Love means investing time and action and honest words. I've pondered how to demonstrate love to my children, to my friends, and to the people who just happen across my path.

This attitude does not come natural to me.

I'd like to think that when I die, people will remember that I loved them. And that I reflected Christ's love. No, that does not come natural to me. My own nature dictates that I live in solitude as a hermit, a reclusive misanthrope.

St. John said that we love God because He first loved us and John encourages us to love each other. And while I've enjoyed great romantic love focused in my marriage, there's more to a broad-spectrum love life than I'm comfortable with. I have to expend effort...and time.

Yesterday, while I was missing those phone calls, I worked on a tight schedule feeling the urge to get my cataloging project done. I'd intended to meet my son Johnny at 2 p.m. for lunch. But with the phone out, and a visit from Jennifer and Terri who worried that they could not contact me by phone—they set it up for me to take a troubled young man on a fishing trip—anyhow, I started out late to do things important to me.

At the library, my first stop, the librarian helped me look for an easy-to-read book, the only one my fishing buddy has ever been able to read and I wanted to be able to talk with him about it and encourage him to learn to read.

Book not on shelf.

I grew impatient, reserved it, and hurried on my way toward the next stop on my list. HA!



As I left the library, there leaning against my car door was a young man, I couldn't remember his name, but he greeted me saying he enjoyed reading my article *Was Jesus A Ghost?* And he wanted to talk about flying saucers!

But I was in a hurry How do I love this young man?

I put my bookbag down and listened to his theories about how the wheels within wheels mentioned in Ezekiel must have been a visitation from saucer people.

Yes, I put aside my impatience to be elsewhere and listened for eleven minutes.

God puts people in our path for a reason—no matter how big a hurry I am in to be about my own affairs.

I assured him that wonderful things and mysteries surround us in this world and that speculation about them fascinates us. The unknown titillates us. That's fun.

But for myself I ask of speculative thoughts, even obscure wheels in Scripture—he said they must be gyroscopes--but does that thought help me be a better man? A better Christian? Better husband? Father? Employee?

If not, then leave it to speculation around a campfire. That's where such things belong. I think our discussion satisfied his curiosity.

Is being willing to be late in my self-appointed rounds showing love?

Maybe.

But the saucer guy also inadvertently influenced a business decision I'm pondering—he, of course knew nothing about my decision process. Maybe God used him to cross my path, not to discuss saucer people, but to unknowingly affirm my decision.

Love is a two way street.

Finally the guy moved his bicycle from my car door and I sped on my way... only to get caught in a traffic jam because of an accident on Normandy Boulevard.

Appropriate Scripture: John Cowart in patience possess your soul.

Good thing the traffic delayed me.

At WalMart, the clerk just coming on duty when I finally got there, took pity on this pathetic old man and gathered up the jeans and pants I've been meaning to buy for months. My sight's too dim to read the labels. She dropped everything to help me.



A happy note: when she measured my waist we discovered that I've lost six inches in the past year! Dropped from a size 50 to a 44. No wonder I've been so baggy lately.

She demonstrated God's love in her service to me and in the time she spent making sure I had just what I needed. And I reciprocated love by telling her how much I appreciated her service, and that she made my life easier and gave me the most pleasant WalMart experience I've ever had.

Next stop.... well, here it gets embarrassing...

For ages Ginny listed the prescriptions by number to order each month. Sunday I called the pharmacy for three prescription refills on the list.

Yesterday when I went to pick up my order, the young woman behind the counter, a long-time acquaintance who always served Ginny and me, and who cried at news of Ginny's death—she gave me a strange look.

“Not to add insult to injury,” she said, “But you don't need this one any more. Do you still want it”? She held up a bottle for me to read the label over the counter. I could not make it out.

“Sure, I do,” I said. And I paid the bill

Got the pharmacy bag home to find I now own a fine supply of Viagra.

There goes my reputation.

The pharmacist must think I'm a dirty, lusty old man...

Who Me?

Anyhow, remember my phone is back working....

Friday, August 9, 2013

On Giving Up, Love, Fishing, and Hero Worship

I add one word to Prime Minister Winston Churchill's famous speech to wartime London. He urged the blitz-weary British, Never give up! Never give up. Never. Never. Never give up!

Unless...

I gave up.

For several days this past week, from 4 a.m. till after midnight I cataloged those Florida history books I bought last week. In the small hours of Wednesday, a thought flitted through my brain: *John, you idiot, why are you doing this?*

Already my catalog reached 85 pages in alphabetical order. Why? When I place these books on the bookshelves, I will not sort them in that order at all.



In my first job as a teenager, I worked shelving books in Jacksonville's old Springfield Library on Silver Street where I learned the Dewey Decimal System of arranging books. It uses a numeric category systems to classify books.

At college in Tallahassee, I loved an old private library where thousands of volumes were shelved by acquisition number—that is, the first book the library bought back in 1840 came first on the shelf, the second book bought stood next to it, the third next to that with no regard for author or subject, and so on for thousands of books.

How could you find anything?

You asked the librarian who looked to be as old as the first book. He remembered what was where. That was the library's orderly system. It worked.

I remember fondly browsing those shelves and discovering an 1848 first edition of Layard's *Excavations At Nineveh*. Loved that ancient tome!

During the late '50s I worked at the Library Of Congress, which uses its own system for tracking the 14 million pieces in the collection; LC shelves major categories of books by assigned letter rather than number like Dewey. I remember H stood for American history, T for aviation and science, and BS for religion (which the irreverent among my buddies on the staff said stood for Bull Shit).

So why was I cataloging my Florida history collection alphabetically? I use a different system for arranging my books. Since I write books myself, I arrange the books I buy by project. When I write about a cook who lived in 1666, I cluster travel books, books about plaque pits, Stephen King's *The Stand*, Samuel Pepy's *Dairies*—all together on the same shelf with authentic cookbooks from that time period.

When I was writing *Glog*, I kept Chesapeake Bay navigational charts, books on fossils, a natural history of crabs, and Revolutionary War books in the same place.

Makes sense to me to arrange any project, or anticipated project, research books together by my writing project, or even anticipated project idea, in the same place.

Therefore, it finally dawned on me, that the 85-page alphabetical catalog I've wasted so many hours on is useless!

Why didn't I realize that sooner?

If you are doing something that does not help you, to stop doing it does not hurt you.



Oh.

Churchill aside, Never give up... unless.

I gave up. I'm moving on to a more productive task. I'll leave cataloging to my literary executor, my daughter Eve, who earned her library science degree in Tallahassee, won a scholarship to study in London, and earned her masters. The cataloging job overwhelmed me and I gave up... congratulations Eve, you win the job! I'm glad you love me.

Speaking of giving up:

Wednesday, after waiting three hours for a friend to show up in a coffee shop, I gave up and drove home.

I felt guilty for giving up and leaving so soon.

But, while there sipping coffee, I read passages on love from C.S. Lewis's anthology of George MacDonald.

I dare not claim to have picked that particular book for a deeper understand of God and man.

No. As I left my home for the coffee shop, I realized that I might want a book to leave on the shop's patio table to keep someone else from grabbing that prime spot and I grabbed the MacDonald book only because it was small enough to stick in my hip pocket and leave my hands free.

The author addresses a problem much on my mind recently—how to love my neighbor. Some neighbors turn me off. Why does God want me to love them? Who is my neighbor that I should give him a thought?

MacDonald said, “The mystery of individuality and consequent relation is deep as the beginnings of humanity. In God alone can man meet man. In Him alone the converging lines of existence touch and cross not.

“A man must not chose his neighbor: he must take the neighbor that God sends him. The neighbor is just the man who is next to you at the moment, the man with whom any business has brought you into contact”.

That zapped me between the eyes.

I should have stuck 700+page *The Stand* in my hip pocket.

As I sipped my coffee waiting, an idea began to form. I pictured love as the beam of a flashlight shining against a wall.

The bright center is love of God and romantic love, like between husband and wife. Moving out from the center, the light is only a little less bright where children, family, and good friends reside. A little further from dead center, light illumines co-workers, customers, the



people who happen to live next door; they are all in your light, but in light not as intense as those people at the center. Still in my light beam, but at the fringe, live the people of casual contact—say, the guy who pumps gas at the station.

No way would I walk up to him and say, “I love you” (especially here in Riverside where I live).

But I can hold him in light—not center stage spotlight, but I can listen to his concerns, pay him honestly, thank him for his service, smile, make his day a little brighter—no, romantic love remains reserved for those in center beam. Jesus said let your light so shine before men—all men—so they may glorify your Father in heaven.

The light beam does not illuminate in concentric circles with clearly defined edges, love light blends, melds or fades in different degrees, but at the source, it's all the same light.

Maybe someday I'll learn to love. Or to catch fish.

My friend Brandon and I went fishing yesterday.

As we drove to Jacksonville's Bethesda Park, which features wheelchair access to a large lake, and facilities of group activities for retarded folk, he told me about his stays in psychiatric wards, his meds, and his psychiatrist. He recommended Dr. T... if I should ever need such help myself.

I've heard that when anyone offers me a breath-mint, I should ALWAYS take the hint, say Thank You, and pop it in my mouth. There is a reason they offered.

Is it the same way when someone recommends a psychiatrist?

Yet, Brandon gave me many good simple ideas I'd never thought of about problems in my own life! His simple wisdom astounded me!

Perhaps God sent him across my path to teach me how to love and value people. Or how to fish.

Here is a photo I snapped of Brandon fishing:

That young man loves to fish!



Let me warn: A huge sign at the park entrance claims the lake is stocked—a blatant lie by our insidious city government!

Another sign on the chain-link gate says it is illegal to keep any bass which measures less than 18 inches long.

I will not incite envy by saying how many fish we caught yesterday, but I assure you, dear reader, that Brandon and I complied with that law.

Nevertheless, when I drove Brandon home he told his aunt, “Today was the best day in my whole life”!

She later phoned to say that in his eyes, I can do no wrong; he hero-worships me; and any word I say is golden.....That scares the Hell out of me!

What happens when I eventually say or do something that offends him?

Jesus said that it would be better for a man to have a millstone tied about his neck and be thrown in the lake than to offend one of these little ones.

I'm not as good a man as the young man thinks I am. I know that, and in time he will too.

I've esteemed my own heroes over the years and I've even written book chapters about some of them.



But always I keep in mind the advise my friend Frank Foster, (God rest him, years ago he and his wife died in the crash of a plane he piloted).

Once when I lavishly praised a person I admired, Frank said, “John, when you put someone high on a pedestal like that, be sure to carry a big umbrella”.

Saturday, August 10, 2013
Reporting To The Mother Ship

Hurt myself yesterday.

The mailman delivered a package from my auto insurance company, a computer instrument to be installed in my car. It monitors everything about my car and reports all information back to the insurance company's Mother Ship hovering somewhere above Seattle.

I phoned my son John, a computer geek, to locate the USB ports beneath the dash and install the Thingy. He crawled around under the car looking for it. Being dad, I just had to supervise, so I got down on the ground, half bent over the driver's seat backwards, flashlight in hand, to see if I could.... well, supervise.

Shouldn't have done that!\

Bad move.

I've been feeling good without arthritis pain the past few days. Too good for my own good. I had a hell of a time getting up from that contortion of twisting under the dash. Hurt. hurt. hurt. Pain. Pain. pain.

Went in the house. Sat down panting till John came in saying he'd managed to finished the job without my supervision!

Thanks, Johnny.

I called the 888 number and reported to the Mother Ship that the device was implanted. Mother told me she knew already. Mother knows everything. Mother listens to every word spoken in my car (she told me not to sing while driving).

Mother insures I drive safe. Her computer tracks how fast I drive. How far I drive. If I signal before turning. Where I go, when I stop, and what I did while stopped. It knows if I run a red light.

The voice-activated spy-eye rebukes me if I were to order fat food at a drive-in window. It will call cops to me if it detects alcohol. Mother calls rescue if I crash the car (she claims she will lower my insurance rates if I don't). And, when I click my safty belt, Mother's computer demands to



know if I'm wearing clean underwear "What if you're in an accident and have to go to the hospital," she nags.

For the past 30+ years I have driven without an accident or getting a ticket. But the insurance company says Mother will save me money. So I agreed to be tracked.

No problem for me. I try to live a transparent life and it bothers me not a whit for the Mother, Homeland Security, government, or anyone else to know what I'm doing when. A few things in my life are private, but nothing's secret.

One thing makes me wonder.

What happens if I go to church tomorrow?

Thing is, I suspect Mother oversees my morals, driving habits, safety, vehicle maintenance, tire and oil pressure. She even locates my car if it's stolen.

Mother always knows where I go.

Mother disapproves if I were to park at a strip joint, go-go club, or a bar. Should I park at such a place, a signal from Mother locks all car doors and won't let me out.

So church is a problem.

It's the church property. Planning to build on the site, the congregation bought acreage where a family friendly drive-in movie stood back during the '60s. As the drive-in movie fad shrank, management opened booths for flea market vendors, and then chose to screen porno films to stay in business.

When the church bought the property, scores of skin flick reels of film had been abandoned in the buildings. So the pastor built a bonfire and burned them. Made the newspapers and tv. Indignant voices became outraged at "book burning by a church".

What did they expect the pastor to do with the porno films? The church owned them because they came with the building? Should the pastor have raffled them off during Sunday School hour?

I oppose censorship. It's wrong to burn somebody else's books, but I have the right to do whatever I want with books I own.

Anyhow, I sometimes attend that church now and then with my son Donald and his wife, Helen. Sometimes we drive their car, sometimes, mine.



I worry about tomorrow morning. What if the Mothership has not updated her Google Maps GPS file for Jacksonville and the computer still records that property location as the site of a porno movie venue?

Will Mother scold, lock me in the car, and not let me out for church?

Sunday, August 11, 2013

Love In Traffic

While driving on some errands Saturday morning, I became the victim (that's not the right word) of Road Love.

All the time I read of victims of road rage where some driver gets pissed off and attacks other drivers. Sometimes the angry one deliberately smashes his car into the person who set him off; or the lady driver pulls a gun out of her purse and shoots other drivers.

Dangerous places these roads.

One day back in April as my son Johnny and I drove to Southside, I stopped at a light and the car behind began to flash his lights and toot his horn. I glanced in the rearview mirror to see the driver behind jump out of his car, leave his door open and run up to my car door.

Utt Oh, I thought, *What did I do to set him off? I'm in big time trouble.*

Not so.

The stranger I'd never seen before who was by then standing at my window had somehow recognized me and wanted to tell me how much he enjoyed reading my writings!

That done, he raced back to his car, the light changed, and traffic moved on.

Yesterday something similar happened.

I've been anxious about some momentous changes I'm pondering for this diary, for my books, and for my personal life. These possible changes scare me.

And no, I don't want to talk out loud about these things yet—if ever.

But all the time I mull such things over and question *Am I doing the right thing? Is God leading me or do I just have a bug up my ass—and is there a difference?*

Contemplating change scares me—darn near paralyzes me. Worries me. I fear screwing up big time. Messing up someone's life. Making a fool of my self. Offending the Lord. Causing pain and heartache to others.



Loosing money. Mistaking a whim for the righteous path... Am I crazy?
Am I evil? Am I—you name it.

I've already taken tentative first steps to bring about these changes but I wonder if I am doing the right thing or fooling myself.

The result—I've decided to wallow undecided.

Am I doing the right thing? Am I doing the right thing?...or not?

So, yesterday I stopped at the redlight at the corner of Cassett and Normandy Boulevard thinking all these monkey-in-the-mirror thoughts.

To save the air-conditioner. (besides, when fishing the other day Brandon's bait pail of pig liver juice sloshed over on my car's rear deck carpet) in the early-morning cool I drove with all car windows down.

A car pulled beside me.

A rusted out old clunker.

Huge guy driving—think black sumo wrestler—the man's car windows were also rolled down.

This stranger looked across into my eyes and yelled four words:

“You're doing good, Man”!

Light changed.

He turned left, I drove straight ahead.

Had I just seen an angel?

Had I'd just heard a voice from the Lord?

I wonder.

I drove on feeling affirmed.

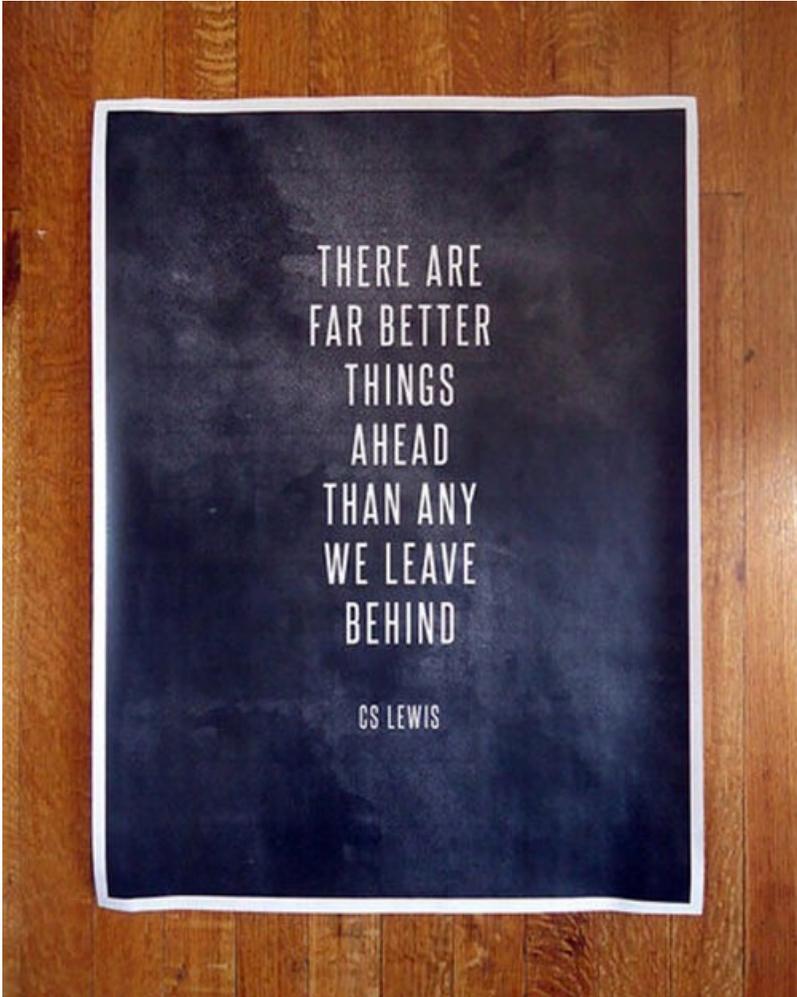
Confident.

Almost.

The Psalmist says, the steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord; if he stumble, his fall will not be fatal.

I'd find that Scripture more comforting if I were a good man.

Am I doing the right thing?





Monday, August 12, 2013
**My Life Among the Flowers:
 A Wonderful Day With Liver Juice**



Hurt myself *again* Sunday.

That Scripture I quoted yesterday about the steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord; if he stumble, his fall will not be fatal—Well, it does not say a thing about sitting outside, smoking my pipe, tipping back too far and flipping ass over elbows into a bed of bromeliads!

What made it worse was that my daughter saw it happen... As did Sherri from down the street, and for all I know Channel 12 News.

The girls rushed squawking to aid the fallen hero. Both wanted to touch me to help me—I loathe being touched—or maybe they wanted to keep me from wallowing over all the flowers.

I fended them off saying nothing was hurt but my dignity. Sherri said, “What dignity”.

Ok. I know I'm blessed to have people who love and care about me. I just hate for such a thing to happen in public. *Lord, why do You send me such*



troubles? Twice in as many days I've appeared a klutz in front of people. You say You love me, So, why do troubles come to me?

Even as I questioned, an answering thought occurred.

Remember last week at the coffee shop when I began reading that small George MacDonald book? Many quotes struck me but this phrase stuck:

MacDonald calls life's troubles, "the sharp-fanged sheepdogs of the Good Shepherd". They hound, and harry and herd us to the place of blessing. Especially when we resist going there on our own.

My friend Barbara White, God rest her, once said, "God loves me just the way I am—and too much to let me stay this way"!

Hence the sharp-fanged sheepdogs of the Good Shepherd.

Wallowing among the bromeliads covered me with dirt.

I walked inside to clean up and Brandon knocked at my door (one of seven visitors today). He's the young man who fished with me Thursday.

He'd heard I'd fallen and wanted to pray for me.

Here, Big Daddy John has been thinking I was helping him... Not so. He is the instrument of grace helping me. He prayed the sweetest prayer I've ever overheard.

Of course he's also indirectly why I was outside in the first place. My car reeks of spilled pig liver juices (Brandon's fish bait) soaked in the carpet. I won't say who spilled it (it was Brandon) but I'd been outside fumigating and vacuuming the car before my mishap.

Other than my fall, Sunday was a great day: I woke at 2 a.m. to lie in the pool on an airmattress to pray and watch the meteor shower. (Plan to do that again tonight).

I only saw one lousy meteor! But that one, as all the heavens do, declared the glory of the Lord.

With that devout idea in mind, I went to church where I snapped at my daughter-in-love, Helen.

Monthly the church holds a free book give-away after service. The pastor asked for copies of the book I wrote on prayer. When Helen saw some guy fingering a copy of my book in the pile, she told him, "My father in law wrote that".

The guy looked up and said, "Free marketing ploy, eh"?

I snapped at Helen for mentioning it. I huffed that I wanted to be modest, humble even—but the truth is that the guy and Helen upset me because



he'd hit the nail on the head. Because I secretly did wish picking up the free book might incline people to pay online for one of my other books.

What I tried to pass off as a gift to God, was indeed just a self-serving marketing ploy at root.

Gad, what a hypocrite I am!

I often disgust me—but not often enough.

Let's leave that crap. Here's a different, more happy, subject:

Late in the evening as I sat mulling in the dark of my back garden, a voice called from over the fence. I could not see who it was. Terri, God bless her, had sent me a happy gift, one she'd found in trash at the curb—a Boy Scout Hat! How cool is that!

Terri knows the Scout Law formed my character more than God's own Laws.

Compare: A Scout is Trustworthy, Loyal, Brave, Courteous, Kind Obedient, Helpful, Thrifty, Clean and Reverent—compare that with ten Thou Shalt Nots.

That hat made me happy.

So, I fell on my ass.

So I ruined my dignity.

So I reek still of pig liver.

So I'm a snapping turtle hypocrite.

None the less, I get to top it all off with my very own Boy Scout Hat.

Another really good day in the life of John Cowart.

Thanks be to God.

Tuesday, August 13, 2013

No. No. Hell No! & Who Knows?

My son Johnny and I were almost killed yesterday.

I am a shy person and have few friends, but they stick.

I've known Wes since 1972, Randy from '73 (he could tell you the exact day because he has a photographic memory). Judge Merritt and I've been friends for 25+years; Rex for 20 years; Barbara (God rest her) for 30 + years; Ann, 20+, Carol, 17; Judy, 15 (Sorry, sure to have left someone out). And my six grown children are my best friends in the world..



For ages bunches of us have gathered each week for Monday breakfast somewhere, and then we retire to talk at my home afterwards –for no other reason than we like each other and enjoy talking together.

Yesterday, for various reasons only three of us showed up at 2-Doors for breakfast, Fred, John and me.. Mid-meal, Johnny and I stepped outside for a smoke in the shade of a small crepe-myrtle tree at the restaurant entrance.

A blue pickup truck rounded the corner off Forest Street on two wheels. It careened wildly, hit the curb about ten feet away from where we stood in its path. It bounced off that curb, fishtailed left into oncoming traffic, straightened out, and sped away.

The Lord preserved John and me from being killed on the spot in an instant. Had the truck's sidewalls not hit that curb, John, the crep-myrtle , and I would now be red and green smears on the sidewalk.

The truck might well have crashed through the restaurant wall and creamed people inside too.

I knocked ash out my pipe. John snuffed out his cigarette. He looked at me, and said, “Dad, you do know that smoking can be hazardous to your health”.

Returning inside to our breakfast I, in one of my introspective moods, made tears stream down my son's face when I talked about how happy I feel about the way Ginny died—not that she died, but the manner of it.

She died happy and peaceful in our home knowing I loved, treasured and adored her. Family and friends, business associates, and medical people honored her with love, care, and esteem all the way through her illness.

Our 44 years of marriage did not end.

It was completed.

Successfully finished.

Consummated, if you will.

By God's grace, Ginny and I accomplished exactly what we set out to do from the start—build a love and a home satisfying to us and honoring to Christ.

We both kept every promise we ever made to eachother.

Ours was not a basketball affair to rebound from, but an arrow aimed at, and hitting, the bullseye dead center.

I've failed at virtually everything I ever undertook in life. Especially at my first marriage; that poor lady found me a terrible disappointment. I



never measured up and we divorced by mutual consent after eleven years.

Thank God that Ginny settled for lower standards in a husband. I pleased her and made her consistently happy in our marriage of only 44 years. I feel I succeeded as Ginny's husband.

In my privileged role as her caregiver, often during those homestretch weeks I spoon-fed her, injected insulin, emptied her catheter, and tended bathroom needs. That stuff's just biology. No doubt in the world Ginny would have done the same things for me had I been stricken first.

I hugged her, I stroked her, I kissed her and told her I treasured her at every wheelchair transfer (up to 20+ times a day). My biggest fear was that my hip might give out and I might drop her on the floor. We made a happy love-dance of that wheelchair maneuverer to keep her safe.

We laughed, and joked and prayed and loved and talked the same as we've done everyday for decades.

Nothing different.

Except she was dieing.

Her last word the night before she died was to speak my name in the most loving tone imaginable.

Arrows right on target.

No wonder I have so few regrets.

I saw her safely all the way Home.

"Till death do us part"--and, by God's grace, death's parting us was bittersweet, but lovely. Since we had to part, we parted in love on the best terms possible. No unfinished business between us. No love lost.

The other day I saw a photo of publisher Hugh Hefner, posed in front of the Playboy Mansion; a cluster of bikini-clad bunnies clinging to him. The caption read: "At his funeral, nobody is going to say, He's in a better place now".

Poor bastard, he reminds me of a modern-day [Tantalus](#).

Some wise Englishman (Churchill, Chesterfield, Chesterton, I forget which one) said, "The chief end of all human endeavor is to be happy at home".

Right!

Other men may build empires. I made my wife happy.

That's my greatest accomplishment in life so far.



A phone conversation Sunday with a friend of 20+ years. (Long ago he asked that I not use his name in my on-line diary. In my writings, I don't use people's real names without their permission and I don't reveal where anyone works or a home address. Such is the world.)

Anyhow, Sunday's conversation sparked my line of thought in the restaurant on Monday morning. My friend wanted to know why I'd not answered his e-mails, given him my new phone number, or called him in months..

I said I had not contacted him until now because I had not wanted to talk with him.

He wanted to know if I want to buy his Rolls Royce?

No.

Will I be selling my home?

No.

Will I have some of my children move back in with me?

Hell no.

Would I ever consider getting married again?

Who knows?

My friend, wheelchair bound, has never made the Monday sessions at my house. Perhaps someday soon I should go visit him. He does get me thinking about values in my life. Talking with him is often thought-provoking; sometimes, just provoking.

Anyhow, back at my home yesterday, talk with Fred and John (and briefly Terri) revolved around Life, Love, God, and more complicated matters—meaning computers.

Fred, a geek, told how years ago he owned a dot-matrix printer which used reams of continuous-length, fan-fold paper boxed under his desk. One day, as he prepared an urgent business report from home, his printer stopped working.

It would not advance the paper.

Line after line printed one atop the other in a single black blur.

He and John (also a geek) reset the printer driver, contacted the HP on-line help-site. They reconfigured settings and advanced settings. They rebooted the interface.

Nothing made that printer print.

Fred decided he'd have to buy a new printer...



But when, after two hours computer-generated frustration, he checked under his desk. There, in the box, blocking the ream of paper, keeping it from moving, slept his cat.

Thursday, August 15, 2013

Crab Monsters, Coffee, Books, and Sexual Fantasies

Wednesday morning I enjoyed talking with Nurse Katie McConnell, LCSW, ACH-SW, a bereavement counselor with Community Hospice.

We discussed everything from that great 1957 science film, *Attack Of The Crab Monsters* (world's easiest film for me to fall asleep in front of) to a newspaper article about a camp for bereaved children which Mrs. McConnell directs.



I wonder if her kids' camp will be held at the seashore?

She listened to my concerns about my own irrational behavior since Ginny died—how much relates to grief and how much to just my going plain crazy.

I told her about buying a book I'm unable to read even though it cost \$180; about how I've stopped perking coffee at home in the mornings; about how I banished the tv set from my home; about how, after years of absence, I've started attending church services again—and other such irrational behavior patterns.

She suggested several methods to cope with such things better, but by and large she feels I'm tracking about normal for a man my age who' has lost a loved one.

We also discussed my recent sex fantasies.



If you are curious about the sex fantasy of a 74-year-old man, let me tell you.....You, dear reader, need to talk with a counselor more than I do.

After running other errands, including a soul-uplifting venture into Wal-Abandon Hope All Ye Who Enter Here-Mart, I returned home to mull over our conversation, to try out three specific suggestions Mrs. McConnell gave me for coping with my mental mush, and to gloat over my Florida History book collection.

My new books pleased me.

I thought, John, now you own many books. Too many for these old shelves. I'll tear down my old shelves and build new ones, then I can eat, drink, relax, read, and take my pleasure.

Sounds almost biblical, doesn't it?

Sunday, August 18, 2013
Saturday's Family Potluck

I boiled and deviled 36 eggs for Saturday's family cook-in (rain threatened, so no cook-out). Like an Assyrian horde in Bible times, my family fell upon those eggs and utterly consumed them. That always happens to my deviled eggs at these gatherings.

Spent the day catching up on family activities: Helen is back from Cape Cod; Mark and Eve leave for Dragon Quest soon; Jennifer and John both face surgery soon; Brandon has a toothache. Donald and the guys are helping me discover new venues for my e-books. Mark offered an idea to make me wealthy....

Good people surround me. I'm honored to be the father of this brood; I'm pleased to be associated with them.

All my kids are smarter than I am—If you don't believe me, just ask any of them.

As usual at these things, I presented a short devotional thought.

Next time, God willing, I'll devil more eggs.

Jennifer gave me the fountain from her old house. Terri and Brandon loaded it and trucked it over to my home. Fred and Donald installed it in my front yard by the birdfeeder. Could not have done without the kids' help, each of the four fountain sections weighs about 200 pounds. Sparkles and sounds lovely.



Note To those curious about the sex fantasies I mentioned last week:

Unless your name is Ginny, Marilyn Chambers, Kay Parker, Margaret Thatcher, or the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders, you need not concern yourself.

Monday, August 19, 2013

Words From A Dreamer and From A Prophet

Saturday night for the first time since Ginny died, I dreamed about her.

What a pleasant experience!

I dreamed that late one night she and I woke up the kids, all pre-teens in my dream, to take them out, still in their PJs, for a treat of donuts—that's something we did now and then when they were small.



Time and again in my dream, either Ginny or I said, “We need to get to bed. Got work tomorrow” but we stayed up later and later because we enjoyed each other and our family so much.

Krispy-Kreme was closed. “Need to get to bed. Got work tomorrow”. But instead of bed, we drove to Krystal. Only to find them closed also. Decided to drive to another all-night restaurant, still saying we should get to bed, but having such a happy time we stayed awake.

I tired to drive across a bridge to Southside only to find the center span was out and workers turned me back, still with the kids playing and singing in the back of our old station wagon and still with Ginny and me acting like, “Two sleepy people by dawn's early light, too much in love to say good night” A common experience while she was alive. And we knew good and well that we'd go to work next day on a modicum of sleep...

I woke Sunday morning happy with my midnight experience even though I knew it was a dream all along.

“Am I a God at hand, declares the Lord, and not a god far away?... Let the dreamer who has a dream, tell his dream; but let the prophet who has My Word speak My Word faithfully”--those words were in the Scripture reading at church Sunday morning.

The pastor spoke on the Resurrection of Christ and on our own eventual deaths and resurrection.

I've wondered if Ginny would even recognize me when I get to die. After all we both will be absorbed by the glory of God and things more important than our temporary relationship, joyous though it was, here on earth.

The Bible says, “No one has ever seen, no one has ever heard, no one has ever imagined what God has prepared for those who love him”.

Funny thing: In a stupor of pain a few days before she died, delirious, Ginny told me, “I'll get to Heaven first and get things all straightened out before you come”.

“Honey,” I asked, “What do you think you'll need to straighten out in Heaven”?

“Whatever is amiss,” she said and fell back asleep.

The pastor pointed out that after He rose from crucifixion and death, Jesus called His disciples by name and they had no problem recognizing Him in spite of the torture He'd been through.



Folks recognized Moses and Elisha (or was it Elijah, I confuse the two) on the Mount of Transfiguration.

And the guy in Hell recognized both Father Abraham and the beggar Lazarus even though a great gulf separated them from him.

I've always thought idea of a happy reunion with loved ones in Heaven was 18th Century saccharine sentimentality.

I was wrong.

Scripture provides enough solid evidence of Christ rising from the dead under His own steam. The resurrection provides the linchpin of faith.

Jesus rose or rotted.

No other alternative.

If He rotted just as you and I and everyone else will, then no reason to pay Him a bit of attention,

If indeed He is declared to be the Son of God by His resurrection from the dead, than that's a different matter altogether.

Isn't it?

Wednesday, August 21, 2013 Is Nice Enough?

Tuesday driving from home to visit Ginny's grave, I counted 18 restaurants where I could have stopped for breakfast.

I chose one.

I drove a mile past another in the same cookie-cutter franchise chain to get to the one I picked.

Why one and not the other? I discern no difference between the two fast-food places; same menu, same decor, same staff turnover, and both within a block of my route along Normandy Boulevard

I suspect God influenced my decision.

My being in that particular restaurant at that particular time may have changed a life or two That's what I suspect. Who knows?

In a recent blog post, my e-friend [Vanilla](#) said, "Decision-making becomes such an integral part of who we are that we don't even realize sometimes that even the smallest decision may lead us in a totally different direction from what might have been.

"The message on the answering machine. Shall we call back? Shall we ignore the caller? Should we eat out this evening? Should we stay in?



“Highly unlikely, you may say, that a choice one way or the other in dealing with such minutiae would have a lasting effect on your life, that one choice may send you down a totally different pathway than would the other. But such things have been, and we will never know!”

I heard the shouting as soon as I entered the restaurant. An irate customer shouted abuse at the cringing counter girl. Something went wrong with his order and it outraged him.

I walked over beside the man—dressed in leathers, boots and chains denoting a biker—and said good morning to the counter girl. I deliberately lowered my voice to speak calmly.

The manager approached telling the girl to take my order while she dealt with the angry man who turned his abuse on her.

Again I spoke in a calm low voice, “That’s alright. Take care of this customer. He was here first”.

The man noticed my tone and lowered his voice too. Still angry and seemingly near violence, he toned down from a boil to a simmer.

The manager opened the cash register and refunded the unhappy man’s money. He stalked out of the restaurant announcing that he would never come in that fucking place again.

Notice, I had not done a thing in the world. No heroic action defending the tearful counter girls. No confronting the bully. All I supplied was a calm presence and a soft voice.

The manager recognized that, she thanked me, and apologized for my having to wait for my breakfast order Then she said, “You’re a nice man. God! I wish we had more customers like you come in here”.

That bothers me.

A nice man.

Not a Christian.

Just another nice guy in a world full of ’em.

Anyone can be a nice guy.

It costs nothing.

Anyone can be a good man.

That’s just the way decent people live.

Being nice or good may well mean only that I don’t feel constipated this morning.

I admire this quote attributed to a mobster:



Don't mistake
my kindness for
weakness. I am
kind to
everyone, but
when someone is
unkind to me,
weak is not
what you are
going to
remember about
me.

- Al Capone

Yes, I want to live a transparent life so people see through me to Christ. Actions do speak louder than words; but without words, without even mentioning that Jesus is Lord, being nice is self-aggrandizing.

Writing in the year 265, the Roman historian Eusebius Pamphili told about an intense persecution of Christians in Alexandria, Egypt; as the pagan mob dragged one believer away for execution, his neighbor exclaimed, "But he was such a good man; I never would have guessed he was a Christian"!

Friday, August 23, 2013
Thrown Beer: A Friday Rerun

Since Ginny died, the chore of keeping this on-line diary overwhelms me. Some days an entry takes me six or eight hours to write. Besides, I don't know what I think anymore because my life makes little sense—not that it ever did.

My daughter Eve suggested that since I have over 2,000 entries from previous years, I should pick ones I find meaningful, or ones which readers request, and re-post one of



*them on Fridays. Therefore, Eve asked me to play this favorite of hers again. So, here repeated is **Thrown Beer**, my entry from **Thursday, July 7, 1994**:*

Gin off to work at CC; Patricia off to summer school.

Devotions: Psalms 35 to 37, BCP.

I worked on *The Reincarnationists* novel all morning -- actually what I did was not work but read over the stuff I've already written.

Then I walked across the bridge to the Post Office to mail Donald's birthday present: a new *Far Side* cartoon book, a copy of T.S. Elliot's *Old Possum's Practical Book Of Cats*, a religious tee shirt (a thorn-crowned head with the caption "What Has God Ever Done For YOU?") and, for old time's sake, a packet of toilet paper (remember the past two years).

I was supposed to mail the July payment to the collection agency but decided to hold it back another month.

On the way home I stopped at the drug store and bought some treats to go in Gin's lunches (since she can't smoke in that wimpy office, I fixed her a bowl of hard candies), a new phone cord, and about \$30 worth of luxury items we have been doing without for ages such as stamps, toothpaste, matches, roach spray, etc. I ran out of money before I could get extra amenities of my own such as razors and hair tonic, but the things I did buy will go a long way toward improving our quality of life.

As I returned home, walking in the blazing sun across the bridge, for the pure hell of it, some ass yelled and threw a drink cup full of beer and ice cubes at me from a passing pickup.

Missed me but made me mad.

This morning's devotional reading from Psalm included phrases such as, "Let them be turned back and brought to confusion that imagine mischief against me... Let the angel of the Lord scatter them... Let their way be dark and slippery. For they have privily laid their net to destroy me without a cause... (Ps 35)

"The ungodly have drawn out the sword and have bent their bow to cast down the poor and needy... The ungodly watcheth the righteous and seeketh to slay him... (PS 36)"

Since I try to get along with everyone and I have no human enemies that I know of, such passages puzzle me; recently I have generally thought them to refer to demon enemies. Nevertheless, this morning as I prayed along with the Psalmist, these passages seemed more important than usual (I normally more or less skip over them); now I wonder if they



did not take on added significance in my devotions so that I would pray for physical protection -- that could well have been a beer bottle or a brick the ass threw at me.

The pickup truck full of young men appeared to be just cruising around seeking a target of opportunity and seeing me as an old man walking with a cane and an arm-load of grocery bags, the temptation for devilment was just too great for them to pass up. Any target will do for the devil; you don't have to be special.

So first I raged at the bastards, I prayed impecatory prayers that would make David blush. I imagined how nice it would be to have a shotgun and answer their attack with a scorching blast.

I imagined how nice it would be that if in throwing the beer, the driver had lost control of the pickup, crashed through the bridge rail and landed in the river below. I could see my self calmly leaning against the rail, lighting my pipe and watching the whole truck-load of yelling young men drown (damn shame there aren't more alligators in the river).

Then I imagined how nice it would be if the young men has squealed to a stop on the bridge, jumped out of their pick-up and came over to hassle me face to face; imagine their surprise when they discovered that I walk with a cane not because I'm crippled but because years ago I studied aikido, a Japanese martial art which includes training in stick fighting, and I believe that my cane could effectively put down three unarmed thugs.

Possibly without killing them.

O but I wish they had stopped.

They might have found the experience educational.

Then I wondered what kind of creep would throw things from a passing truck at any pedestrian? Did they think it funny? Had they seen me somewhere before and found me offensive for some reason? Were they spaced out on drugs? Drunk? Just being mean and cussed?

God ought to do something about people like that.

The words of David's Psalms I'd read this morning returned to my mind: "Lord, how long wilt thou look upon this?... Let them be put to confusion and shame together that rejoice at my trouble; let them be clothed with rebuke and dishonor... Wicked doers shall be rooted out... The ungodly shall be clean gone... Their sword shall go through their own heart... The arms of the ungodly shall be broken".

Sounds all right to me.



Sic 'em Lord.

Show the creeps who's Boss.

But what about forgiving my enemies? Didn't Jesus say to turn the other cheek when some ass throws a bottle at you? Didn't He say, "Resist not evil". When the soldiers spit on Him and beat Him and mocked Him, didn't He teach compassion even then. When they drove the nails through His hands, didn't He say, "Father, forgive them"?

Ok. So I'm a Christian, my mind grudgingly admitted -- why do I think about religion at such inconvenient times as this? -- I ought to forgive these guys because Christ forgives me. "Forgive me my trespasses as I forgive those who trespass against me."

But how can I dismiss this incident as a youthful prank? What if the missile had hit me; I could have been blinded, crippled or killed -- that truck must have been going 50 miles per hour. What if Ginny had been walking with me and they hit her? What kind of person throws things at an old guy walking with a cane?

At this point -- God must get a perverse pleasure out of doing this to me -- I suddenly remembered another pesky phrase about wicked ungodly people from this morning's Psalm:

Right in there with curses on evil people who set traps for others, and dig pits in another person's path, and who wink with their eyes and gnash with their teeth, busy mockers who steal from the poor and trip the blind -- right there in that same cluster of verses, God mentions:

"The ungodly borroweth and payeth not again".

And here this very morning I'd spent a good bit of time and energy trying to figure out how to squirm out of paying that bill I owe!

Now wait just one minute here. Does that mean that in God's sight my sin of not paying this bill (and Lord, You know that collection agency doesn't need the money nearly as bad as I do) is equal to the sin of those guys throwing things at pedestrians?

That can't be right.

Here's the difference.

Them -- the wicked ungodly sinners who yelled at me and threw the beer -- is them.

Me -- the wicked ungodly sinner who borrowed money and has not repaid it -- is me.

Can't God see the difference?



Here comes another passage from this morning's Psalm reading to mind (I've got to stop reading this stuff, it's too unsettling):

"Flee from evil and do the thing that is good... the Lord loveth the thing that is right" (Ps 37:27).

God's primary characteristic is holiness. He is pure. undefiled. He is light and in Him is no darkness at all -- why should he regard my favorite form of darkness any better than He regard's the other guy's darkness?

Both I and the beer-throwers will stand before the holy face of God.

They must answer for their deeds.

I must answer for mine.

Makes me squirm.

"Forgive me my trespasses, just as I forgive those who trespass against me."

As I continued trudging across the bridge in the 98 degree heat, I began to look for a way to excuse the young men in the pick-up.

Maybe they had not really thrown the beer; maybe the guy just had it out the window and it slipped from his hand just as the truck passed me.

Maybe, he saw me trudging with that heavy load in the heat, and, maybe with a distorted sense of compassion, he thought that a cold slosh of beer would refresh me. Maybe he did a misguided act of mercy.

Maybe, he did throw the beer deliberately but next Sunday he will attend an evangelistic meeting and remember the mean thing he did, feel shame and conviction and be converted -- so his action was really part of God's plan.

Maybe...

Bull!

Excusing is not forgiving.

If I excuse a sin against me, I can downplay it, then I don't have to forgive it.

Excusing takes all human blame away and places it on the circumstance, and I don't need to forgive circumstances; God only requires that I forgive the sinner who bugs me personally.

Excusing the sinner's action is a cop out.

Yes, the guy did it.

And, yes, I must forgive him.



The burden for action, the deed of forgiving, falls on me alone.

It is inescapable.

So, as I reached the other side of the bridge, I said the words: "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge". But I felt no more kindly toward the guys in the pickup.

Am I supposed to?

Meanwhile, what am I going to do about that collection agency bill?

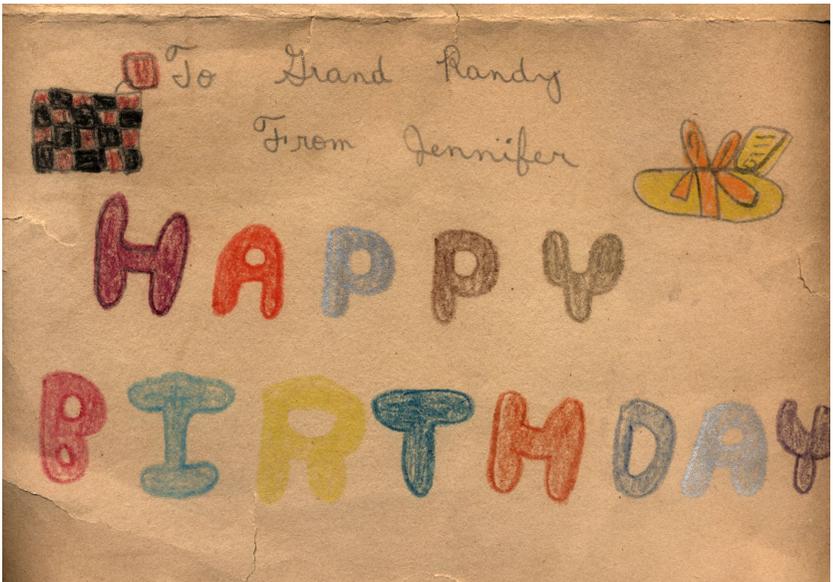
Sunday, August 25, 2013

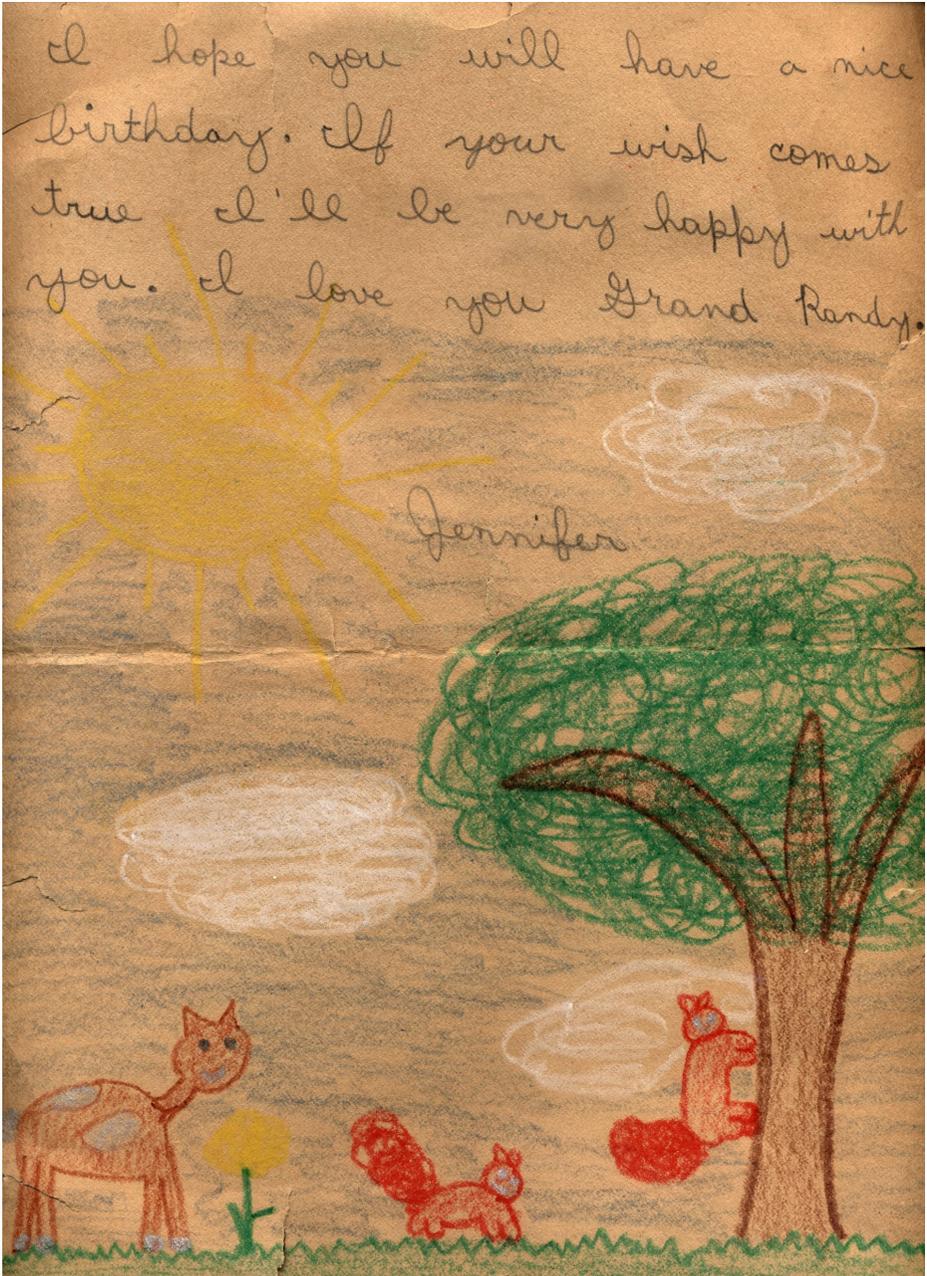
Notes To GrandRandy

Friday GrandRandy met me for breakfast; he brought three notes sealed in a plastic ziploc bag. They were notes which Jennifer, Ginny and I wrote him in April of 1981.

Randy has been such a good friend and part of our family for so many years that when the kids were little they coined his title—revolving around the sun, in the constellations of their minds was Grandfather, Grandmother and GrandRandy

I'd forgotten all about these notes but Randy saved them all these years. I got a kick out of seeing these:







April 5, 1981

Dear Randy -

Hi from sunny hot Florida. The kids (including Patricia) had their first shower bath with the hose. I imagine our water bill will surely shoot up since the hose was on at least 3 hours!

Your wonderful godchild now walks and talks. She is learning the fine art of potty training.

I have not been doing all the heavy reading like John. Just trying to keep up with everyone is enough. This week I need to make a bunny suit for Donald. He is starring in his program this

for him.

Come down when you can. We all enjoy see you.

Ginny



John W. Cowart

743 E. 59Th. ST.
Jacksonville, Florida 32208

April 5, 1961

Dear Randy,

Those of us poor Christians enmeshed in dead formalism who often resort to written prayers instead of relying on the extemporaneous outpourings of tongue (and heart) do have some interesting experiences. For myself I have found President Reagan a difficult man to pray for. The best I could do was "Lord bless Pat --- & help his plans to work out better than I expect they will." Obviously such a prayer is a trivial inadequacy in the light of being commanded to pray for those in authority over us. Therefore, not long ago I began seeking some written prayer which would cover all the bases.

Before I took to formal prayer my prayer list consisted of a scrap of paper with a line down the middle & headed "US & Them" meaning my family vs everybody else. Often the pressure of our own needs precluded my ever getting to the "Them" side of the list.

Then a few months ago in a second hand book store I stumbled across a volume entitled "The Acts & Exercises of Holy Living" by Jeremy Taylor. In the year 1651 he wrote a prayer that was just what I was looking for. In two or 3 short pages he prays for everyone from the King & Nobility to slaves rowing in the galleys. His prayer also includes a petition to help Virgins retain their chastity, to help Voyagers be safe from pirates etc.

In some ways it seemed as though I ought to up date this prayer, some

(over)





— 2 —

sections just didn't seem applicable unless you read *privates* as "sky jackers". I was tempted to omit some sections but on reflection I decided to go whole hog and pray all *Tris* prayer.

So, every morning, recently I have prayed, "To all who are condemned to death, do Thou minister comfort, a strong, a quiet, and a resigned spirit; Take from them the Fear of death, and all remaining affections to sin, and all imperfections of duty, and cause them to die full of grace, full of hope."

This morning before service, the office manager of the Church handed me a letter addressed to me from *Tris* Good Shepherd. It was from Zambia, Africa: A Mr John Masefu apparently has read one of my articles. He is awaiting execution in a Maximum security prison there. He asks me to pray about his final appeal to their supreme Court. (I have no idea what his crime is supposed to be; he says his in prison unjustly but then so did St. Paul)

Anyhow I'm very pleased about *Tris* turning my prayer life — such as it is — has taken and I'm very glad I didn't drop the outmoded parts of the prayer just because I didn't happen to personally know anyone condemned to death. I agree with the *Charismatic*s that we often pray better than we understand.

I was excited about *Tris* and wanted to tell you — other than this every thing is normal; yesterday ^{afternoon} we had no idea what we could possibly find the children for supper; but God... and we even ~~could~~ served a guest and now have plenty. He's shown us this particular miracle before but it never fails to excite me. I'm ~~beginning~~ ^{beginning} to think He knows what He's doing.

Yours
John



Monday, August 26, 2013
Queen For A Day

Yesterday at church the pastor said that as Christ changes us from the inside, we are not only to endure life's bad changes, but we are to actively seek to bring about changes for good.

After church I changed...

Not necessarily for the better.

The ladies in my family get together every few weeks for a Girls Night Out. Somehow, I landed in their pizza party—but they only allowed me to attend if I became an honorary girl by wearing a pink bow in my hair.

Alas, the things I do for pizza!





Tuesday, August 27, 2013
Amateur Theodicy

The problem of theodicy must not be much of a problem to God because He never bothers to address it in Scripture.

That's where our discussion left off after Fred, John, Wes, and I enjoyed breakfast yesterday.

The science of Theodicy examines the question of how and why a perfectly good, almighty, and all-knowing God permits evil to exist in the world. The Greek term literally means “justifying God”.

As I recall, in his Pulitzer Prize winning play *J.B.*, poet Archibald MacLeish summed up the problem of a loving God and the existence of pain and evil in lines spoken by the devil:

If God is God, He is not good;
If God is good, He is not God.
Take the even, take the odd.

Yes, even the devil knows, great indeed is the mystery of godliness.

Why is there evil in the world if a good God created our universe?

Wes pointed out the Scripture uses the word *evil* in three senses:

One meaning refers to common troubles visited upon all men in the daily course of our lives. Like when you leave late for work and your car won't start.

Another meaning refers to calamities such as tsunamis, hurricanes, earthquakes and disease—disasters like the Great Fire of Jacksonville in 1901 which burned brothels and orphanages, bars and churches with indiscriminate scorching flames.

The third meaning of evil Wes proposed is moral iniquity—the wrong things we do to each other in rebellion against God.

I cited a cartoon of a man praying, “Lord, there are starving children and abused women and war and cheating and corruption—so much evil in the world—Why don't You do something about it”?

A Voice from a cloud answers, “Funny, I was about to ask you that same question”.

Fred observed that we are irrational creatures. We first do something then afterwards think of a reason to justify our action. He said that latent in humanity is the potential for any and every sort of stupid, bullying, cruel, sorry, and sinful act. Then we justify our actions almost as an afterthought and we convince ourselves that we are in the right all along.



We look after Number One and ask "What's in my best interest?" and devil take the hinemost.

I rehashed an old idea from Wes about accusing and excusing. When someone breaks in line ahead of me, I accuse him of transgression saying, "But I was here first". Thus I appeal to a moral standard which I expect the other guy to acknowledge. But, he excuses his action saying, "I'm in a hurry because I have a dental appointment." Thus, he unwittingly acknowledges that same moral standard, but claims an overriding justification for his boorishness.

Whether I accuse someone else, or excuse myself, either way I admit that there exists some standard of behavior that is being broken.

Such things ought not to be.

The Lord doesn't play that game; He said, "Be ye holy for I am holy".

My living room grew thick with cigar smoke as the three of us talked for three hours about the problem of evil in the world and why a good God permits it.

Actually, the thing that springboarded us into this subject was Wes's account of his experience with an insurance company's telephone tree in the customer service—HA!--department.

Yes, what more proof of the prevailing existence of evil does anyone need than phoning a company or government agency for service?

And what are we Christians to do when caught in the web of this world's system?

We must be kind to each other and not make life harder for other people than it needs to be. Ginny used to say, "We are to do what we can, where we are, with what we have".

The Lord's love and His ways can be trusted without understanding.

If I understood the answer to the problem of theodicy, how would that understanding make me a better man, a better husband, a better father, a better employee?

I already know everything I need to know to do my plain duty today.

Am I willing to do it?

Ah, there's the rub. I'd rather question and muse and discuss obscure theological terms with my friends than be willing to obey and act on the light I already have.

God need not explain Himself to me; I wouldn't understand it if He did.



Besides, Wes said, the problem of theodicy must not be much of a problem to God because He hardly bothers to address it in Scripture.

After the guys left, I spent the afternoon driving my eldest daughter on four hours of errands, As we drove downtown to drop him off, Fred asked, “How many psychiatrists does it take to change a light bulb?--Just one, but the bulb has to be willing to be changed”.

Thursday, August 29, 2013
Tough Questions For Me To Ponder

Yesterday, Nurse Katie McConnell, LCSW, ACH-SW, a bereavement counselor with Community Hospice, posed tough questions to me. I'm to ponder these questions till our next session.

I see her periodically for grief counseling since Ginny's death; her advice stays me on an even keel.

Mrs. McConnell asked me to try to see myself as Ginny saw me, to focus my thinking on what Ginny saw in me that caused her to adore me, why Ginny had faith in me, and why she trusted me.

In my mind, other than being more or less housebroken, I have nothing to offer a woman. So, what did Ginny see in me that generated her intense love?

It's a wonderful wonder to me that Gin found me precious. No doubt of that. She treasured me and I, her. What could she have seen worthwhile in me that I can't see?

My snap answer to Mrs. McConnell was that Ginny set low standards for her husband.

But she didn't.

She was quality and she expected quality. She did not bestow her love haphazardly. But why on me?

Well, Ginny took in strays.

Stray kittens, starving puppies, wounded people found welcome at our house.

Once, having slept late, I stumbled into the bathroom to find a man standing at the sink shaving with my razor. I blundered to the kitchen where Ginny, surrounded by a swarm of kids, fried eggs.

“Who is the guy in the bathroom?” I asked as I poured my coffee..

“Oh, he just got out of prison. I met him down at the corner store few minutes ago when I walked down to buy milk. He caught the wrong bus



to the end of the line and is stranded. I told him he could clean up here and that after breakfast we'd drive him home on our way to church"....And we did.

Such incidents were common in Gin's compassionate heart. Our kids grew up under Ginny's example so that, to this day, they do such charitable acts in their own homes.

Was I just another stray Ginny took in? If so, why did she keep loving me with all her heart all these years? Nobody loves a sick cat for that long.

Maybe Ginny loved me for my entertainment value. She always laughed (or groaned) at my terrific jokes.

As Ginny lay on her deathbed just before her final coma, I pulled a hand-kissing gag that I've done for Ginny for 40+ years, and she giggled like a schoolgirl just like the first time I pulled it. That astounded our daughters who were all gathered round.

How you two love eachother! they said.

They were right.

We did.

Mrs. McConnell did not use the term, but she hinted she may have detected that I have a tiny problem with low self-esteem.

Who, me?

Our conversation also touched on the possibility of my getting married again; but that's a subject for later. And no, Google Ads, I'm not interested in a mail-order bride from Russia; but thanks for e-mailing me all those enticing bikini pictures.

Do I miss Ginny now that she's died before me?

I recognize my feelings as similar to the bitter-sweet pangs I felt in highschool when the unattainable girl of my dreams graduated in a class a year ahead of me.

She's gone ahead, but she still delights me.

Friday, August 30, 2013

The Chicken-headed Pot Holders—A Friday Re-run,

The following diary entry comes from page 70 of my book *A Dirty Old Man Goes To The Dogs* (www.bluefishbooks.info); I wrote this on March 1, 2009.

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



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

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

Where could they be?

I could not remember.

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

Someone may have moved them someplace else.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



I never before knew that reading those was one of Ginny's goals. Wonder what else she intends?

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

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

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

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

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

We both find the prospect traumatic.

We like being together.

We have fun.

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

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

Remember Tailhook?

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

Being a Christian husband at peace with the Lord and serenely confident of His daily protection, I also entertained visions of traffic accidents, plane crashes, hotel fires, and even a nuclear attack on one city or the other while she's gone.

I believe you can never be too paranoid

No problem in any of these scenarios.

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

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

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

That's ok.

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



Tuesday, September 3, 2013
Invited, Hugged, and Nudged

Bromeliads I planted at the front door began to bloom last week. This year they open earlier than usual; that's the big news from my house. Lot of work; worth the trouble.

Hundreds of these flowers surround my home.

Here's a photo I snapped yesterday:

Many things which require sweaty effort prove worthwhile in the long-run. To me, attending church services falls in to this category. Attending meetings forms the smallest and most difficult part of my faith.

I suspect I was cut out to be a Christian hermit sealed in a cave with some kind soul pushing food through a slot in the rock wall every couple of days. I could be downright devout if I never had to associate with people.

Who couldn't?

Alas, neither the world nor the kingdom of God work that way.

Association with others tests our meddle. We try their faith and they try ours. Like steel on steel we sharpen eachother.

I underwent a test of faith and obedience Sunday at church.





I loath being touched by strangers. If touched unexpectedly I cringe, panic, tremble, and sometimes stop breathing. Don't know why I'm that way, but I always have been.

So, the Lord God exercises His sense of humor by luring me into a *friendly* church. They grab and claw at me and pat me on the back and take unwarranted liberties with my body.

There is even this ~~old~~... ~~elderly~~...mature lady who stands near the church door and hugs unsuspecting strangers. She sees that as her ministry to the Lord.

I usually slip in a side door to avoid her but Sunday I wanted a bulletin and had to enter church through the main entrance—where she got me. I offered my hand for her to shake but she pushed it aside to physically hug me. I tried to twist aside, but her welcome is relentless. As I tried to avoid her hug, there flashed into my mind the *Summa Theologica*:



And a thought came to me, I don't call it the voice of the Spirit, but the thought said, *John Cowart, your ministry at this moment is to stand still and let this poor lady do hers.*

So I did.

I stood there defenseless holding my bulletin in one hand and my cane in the other and being hugged until she released me to attack her next victim. And when she let go, I even said, “Thank you”.

Is this the hardest thing Christ is ever likely to call on me to do?



Sometimes I serve God best by shutting up, standing still, and letting others accomplish what He has called them to do.

Here are my jottings in that church bulletin:

Yes, the pastor prepares his sermons in advance and prints an outline and Scripture references in the bulletin. Yesterday he instructed a near standing-room-only crowd to invite even more people to attend services on September 15th as part of a National Back To Church Sunday.

Consider yourself invited.

(Use the side door if you want to escape hugging).

Jesus said, "Whosoever will may come".

We are invited to come to Him. He stands at the door and knocks; if anyone hears His voice and opens the door, Christ promises to come in and share His feast.

The Church universal also invites, "The Spirit and the Bride say come".

Be nice if you attended the same church I do on 9/15/13 (Christ Church, Jacksonville, FL, 6310 Blanding Blvd., 9 a.m.).

But, since the Spirit of God has been drawing you to Himself—He has been, hasn't He?—then seek His face at the church nearest your own home, or at the kind of church your grandmother went to. You will be welcomed whichever one you show up at.

Who is Time of Transition? **When Inviting People To Church:** *Ken, Delle, Phil, M.C.P., Carolyn, Fred*

1. Invite People Who Receive Their Need For Help.

How to be a Friend "But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." *NT-174457, Self-proposition*

2. Expect People To Refuse My Invitation.

Reality "Jesus replied with this illustration: 'A man prepared a great feast and sent out many invitations. When all was ready, he sent his servant around to notify the guests that it was time for them to come. But they all began making excuses. One said he had just bought a field and wanted to inspect it, so he asked to be excused. Another said he had just bought five pair of oxen and wanted to try them out. Another had just been married, so he said he couldn't come.'" *IS*

Luke 14:16-20 (NLT)

3. I Must Receive Those Who Come Hospitably.

To the Father, Bless "The servant returned and told his master what they had said. His master was angry and said, 'Go quickly into the streets and alleys of the city and invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.' After the servant had done this, he reported, 'There is still room for more.' So his master said, 'Go out into the country lanes and behind the hedges and urge anyone you find to come, so that the house will be full.'" *W*

Luke 14:21-23 (NLT)



But, if you came to Christ Church that Sunday, then the hug lady might hug you instead of me, so do come.

Please come.

Please.

Thursday, September 5, 2013
Welcome Home, Bob

My long-ago friend Bob Phelps died Monday.

His obituary cites his love for Christ as a defining factor in his life.

When I first met Bob back in the 1980s, he defined himself as an agnostic; last time I saw him a few years ago, he told me that my life had contributed a little bit to his becoming a Christian.

That's odd because Bob's newspaper columns made him a celebrity with wide-spread influence; at the time, I worked as a minim-wage mail clerk at the paper with no influence at all.

When Bob's first wife died in tragic circumstances, I think he was the one to discover her body in the garage. When I offered condolences, Bob told me his lawn needed cutting and he had neither energy nor spirit to cut it. So I loaded my lawnmower in the back of my old clunker and drove to his affluent neighborhood and, working alone, I cut grass.

What witness is there in cutting grass by yourself?

I thought it was just the decent thing to do.

That, and a bit of verbal testimony eventually led to his accepting Christ as Lord, but that decision came about through someone else's ministry..

If I remember correctly, early on, Bob was one of the guys at the newspaper who teased by calling me a Rabid Fundamentalist, the name of my website today.

Once he became a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, Bob followed whole-heartedly and his wholesome testimony for Jesus spread to many foreign countries as well as throughout Florida.

The man had a way with words. Once he visited our home just after our 5-year-old Jennifer had broken her leg falling off her bicycle and dashed around the house on crutches. In one of his newspaper columns, Bob wrote that walking beside Jennifer was like walking next to a knee-high helicopter!

Here is an excerpt from Bob's September 4th news obit written by *Florida Times-Union* reporter Dan Scanlan:

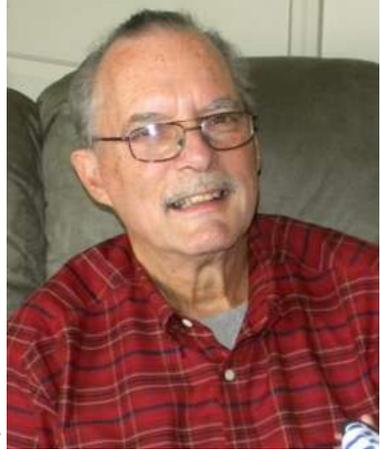


Retired veteran *Florida Times-Union* writer and columnist Robert L. “Bob” Phelps died Monday in his Live Oak home after a short illness, according to the family.

The 70-year-old veteran journalist wrote more than two decades of stories and columns in the *Times-Union* and its sister paper, the *Jacksonville Journal*. His retirement was followed by years of volunteer work, including overseas mission trips and a traveling campground ministry.

Harry Reagan, a former television journalist and Jacksonville city councilman, knew Mr. Phelps for decades.

“He was a good journalist who did his job and asked me the tough questions,” Reagan said.



Pamela Terczak remembers when Mr. Phelps and his wife were Sunday School teachers in the late 1990s at Shindler Drive Baptist Church.

“I don’t know of any more caring and loving person,” she said. “... The fact that he adopted [daughter Jenifer from Haiti] I am not surprised. They have such a love for the Lord.”

The Erie, Pa., native went to Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio. A U.S. Air Force veteran, he began his newspaper career in Joplin, Mo., and came to work at the Jacksonville Journal in 1977. He wrote for the *Times-Union* when the Journal was shuttered in 1988.

A July 20, 1999, story announcing his retirement said he was “hitting the road” at age 56 after he had “covered everything from politics at City Hall to wart hogs at the zoo,” including a regular column for 12 years called “Phelps’ People.”

Then he and his wife traveled from campground to campground holding Sunday-morning services and Bible studies through their Campfire Ministries, the “best years of our life,” Linda Phelps said.

Mark Middlebrook, who worked with Mr. Phelps’ as an editor, said they reconnected in recent years on Facebook, discussing a mutual love of nature.

“I will miss him a lot,” he said. “He was a really fine person with a good eye and he was a good storyteller and a good writer.”

Friday, September 6, 2013

A 90-Year-old dieing Man—A Friday Rerun

The following diary entry comes from page 185 of my book *A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad* (www.bluefishbooks.info); I wrote this on September 28, 2005.



My friend, Ginger, a nurse in a major area hospital, often tends to dieing patients. After her shift this morning, she called inviting me to breakfast. She's run into a situation which upsets her.

The patient, a man in his mid 90s, was a preacher. He's suffered a stroke with many medical complications. Heart problems. Kidney failure. Diabetes. And a host of other age related ailments. When he is lucid, he appears to be at peace and ready for death. As the Bible puts it, he is full of days and ready to be gathered to his fathers.

But his daughter insists on every possible medical intervention to keep him going.

This daughter, a deeply religious person, wants the hospital to get the old man well enough to travel. Then she plans can carry him to a faith-healing meeting conducted by one of the television preachers she watches. There, she feels, the old man will be cured.

The lady sits by her dying father's bedside continually with a huge black Bible open in her lap. The room's television blares out religious programming. And the lady loudly proclaims to any and all passers-by that she expects God to perform a miracle and heal her father.

Several things about this situation upset Ginger.

"John, she's going to be devastated when the old man dies," she said. "I think she's going to just lose it and come apart".

Ginger thinks this lady yearns so desperately for hope that she's relying on religious fantasy instead of realistic faith.

Jesus never cured anybody of old age.

Ginger, a dedicated Christian who wants to live as a testimony to Christ among her coworkers, is also concerned about the effect this woman's stance has on the hospital staff.

When skeptics see this Christian lady's frantic clinging, how can they take what we Christians say about our belief in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come?

Does our own behavior belie our own words?

This dear lady proclaims that she expects a miracle, for God to make a sick 90-year-old man healthy and young again.

Can God perform such a miracle?

Certainly.

Is that likely?

There's a reason they're called miracles.



Once I had a toothache. An abscessed tooth. I did not have money to see a dentist. I could not get into a charity clinic. I suffered and suffered.

I prayed for God to heal me, to ease my agony, to make my pain go away.

Nobody home in Heaven that week.

Finally I boiled a pair of pliers, rinsed my mouth out with alcohol and pulled my own tooth.

I do not recommend this.

Did my faith in a loving God fail?

Damn right it did!

Nothing like a good toothache to turn this particular Christian into a practicing atheist.

Why did God let me suffer in agony like that?

I have no idea.

I do know that He himself suffered anxiety:

“Father, if it is at all possible, let this cup pass from me...”

I do know that He himself felt abandoned in pain:

“My God! My God! Why hast Thou forsaken me”?

I do know that He himself cared about the family of the dying.

“Woman, behold thy son...”

I do know that the life Christ offers us is based on physical reality:

“I thirst”.

No fantasy about it.

Under dirt, buried in a tomb for three days Christ, like a visitor in a burn unit, walked out with a validated parking ticket in hand, and headed back Home.

He once said, “In my Father’s house are many mansions... I go to prepare a place for you so that where I am, there you may be also”.

I grieve for Ginger. This is the third big hit she’s taken this week.

I grieve for the lady clinging to her Dad because I think this is more about her than about him.

I wonder how much of my own faith is fantasy and how much is reality.



My experience teaches me to view the world as a pretty screwed up place, and it seems that Jesus holds that same view; He said he came to save the utterly lost in the worst possible situations (the incarnation did not take place in Disneyland).

But this world ain't the whole show.

We live in a staging area.

Temporary quarters.

Transitional housing.

Dorm rooms for the semester.

Resurrection and Home lie ahead.

Monday, September 9, 2013

Can't Keep It Secret

last week my son Johnny and I tried something sneaky.

Got caught.

What we did was not illegal, although many Christians consider it a sin or, at the least, as a thing contributing to the delinquency of adults.

It was just something I did not want anyone to know about.

We picked a time when nobody should have been around, but the staff of a nearby church was meeting and a secretary glimpsed us out the window. She asked the minister, "What are those two guys doing out by the dumpster?" The assembled staff watched us and... Busted.

Jesus once said, "Whatsoever ye have spoken in darkness shall be heard in the light; and that which ye have spoken in the ear in closets shall be proclaimed upon the housetops".

I asked the minister not to mention what we'd done, but... you guessed it: at church Sunday between six and ten people mentioned it to me.

Drat! Can't keep anything secret. I felt so ashamed that anyone knew what I'd done. Wanted to crawl in a hole and hide.

Jesus did say that there are three things we ought to keep secret.

In His sermon from the Mount, He said, "When thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth. That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly".

After Ginny died and I took over the check book, I discovered that she had supported many charities that I'd known nothing about. She kept her giving secret.



And she used to tease me that I did Jesus one better: He said not to let your left hand know what your right is doing—Ginny said that most of the time my right hand does not know what my right hand is doing!

I suspect Jesus told us to give in secret so we would not feel embarrassed if other people knew how little we give.

Jesus also said that we are to pray in secret.

“When thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret”.

Again, if people knew how little I pray, I'd be shamed. I once even wrote a book about prayer and it's shameful to realize that at most I give God a nod of acknowledgement as I go about my own affairs, yet I'd like people to think of me as a godly man.

And when I pray aloud in public, I get a kick out of my own neat turns of phrase and clever eloquence and I get a kick when blue-haired old ladies say, “Mr. Cowart, that was a lovely prayer”.

Wonder if God thinks so?

Jesus also said we are to fast in secret.

“When thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; that thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly”.

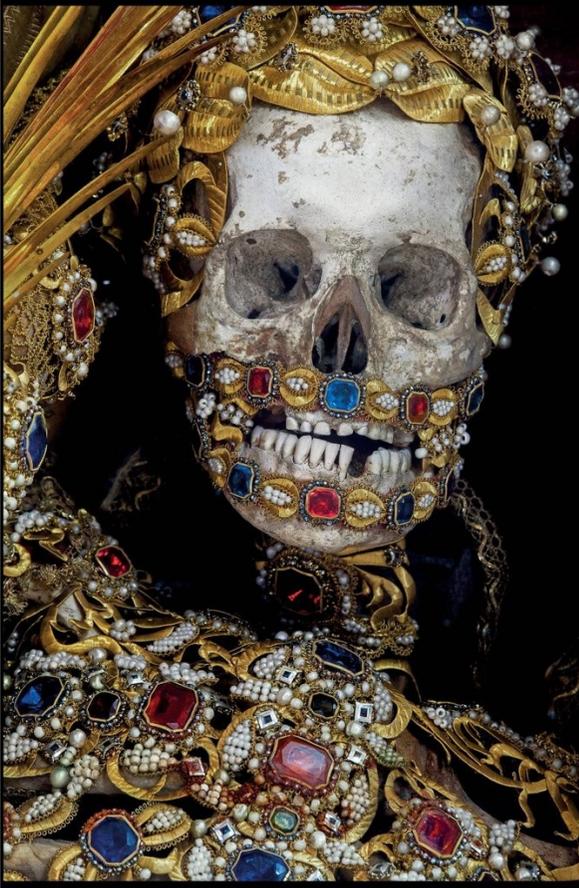
This one, I got knocked!

Why, no one looking at my waistline will ever in this world guess how much I fast. It's a secret.

Tuesday, September 10, 2013

The Wealthy Dead

We brought nothing into this world and it is certain that we will take nothing out—but some people give it a good try. Just look at these jewels!



Yesterday I visited Ginny's grave.

I visit about once a week.

I'm not sure if I visit to honor her memory or just to mull over things about my own remaining life in a quiet peaceful place.

While at the cemetery I reflected on what a wonderful legacy Ginny left to me.

Afterwards I ate lunch at Sonny's BBQ where I bumped into Debbie, a lady who worked in Ginny's office. She and her husband were there after running around all day taking care of grandchildren.

Debbie told me how much Ginny was missed in the workplace, and how highly people there regarded my wife, and how Ginny bettered the lives of so many poor people.



I enjoyed my own lunch at another table and when I finished the waitress said that the couple I'd been talking with, before they left the restaurant had paid for my lunch too.

Ginny left a good impression and good memories with virtually everyone she met and with many people she had never met.

The only jewelry buried with her ashes was her stainless steel MedicAlert bracelet with her name engraved on it.

Not everyone gets buried that simply.

In churches across Europe, art historian Paul Koudounaris hunted down 400-year-old jewel-encrusted skeletons—important people who tried to take it with them.

Koudounaris has written a book about finding these Medieval, jewel-encrusted skeletons; his photos can be found at: <http://cavemancircus.com/2013/09/07/400-year-old-jewel-encrusted-skeletons-uneearthed-across-europe/#more-24521>



When I was younger and a member of an archeology society, I uncovered many skeletons here in Northeast Florida.

Following is a photo I snapped with my Brownie camera in 1955; it shows the first flexed burial I helped excavate:

This man died about the same time as those jeweled people in Europe. He was buried with no beads, no arrowheads, no pottery, yet today he



stands in the grace and love of God as tall as the jeweled dead in the other photos.



Someone wise said, “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, ... For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also”.

So, once there was this tv reporter who asked the wife of a billionaire who had died, “How much did he leave”?

She said, “He left it all”.

Thursday, September 12, 2013
Pesky Scripture and Yard Work

As I mounted the ladder to clean rain gutters and blow leaves off my roof, two quotes sprang into my mind: one from a porno film, the other from the Bible—my mind works that way.

The porno film hero, if you can call him that, said, “I don't need no damn girl to change my flat tire”. Being full of macho pride, he insisted on changing the tire himself.



He was like me insisting on climbing to the rooftop carrying the leaf-blower, a grabber for picking up sticks, and my cane to hobble around up there. I wanted to do it myself.

The second quote followed on the heels of the first: “Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall”.

No. I did not fall off the roof.

Not my fault that I didn't.

How stupid can I be?

74, crippled up with arthritis, wobbly on solid ground, dictated to and directed by macho pride—I can do this myself.

And, for good or ill, I did.

I've been reading John Bemrose's *Reminiscences of the Second Seminole War* in 1836. On walking into an Indian ambush which killed a number of other soldiers, Bemrose said, “On Getting back to the fort, I saw plainly that a merciful Providence had again preserved me; therefore to Thee, O My Heavenly Father, are my thanks due. Thou hast preserved me in many and great dangers when through sickness or calamity I have been cast down, thine hand hath protected me, and to Thee, and Thee only, are my thanks due!”

He had been picking huckleberries in the war zone.

No dumber than my climbing on the roof.

Maybe it's a guy thing.

Besides blowing off the roof, I raked and weeded a flower bed at the abandoned house next door—as if I don't have enough yard work to do in my own yard.

But, this house has been abandoned close to five years. Rumor has it that the owner is serving in Afganistan. Not sure if that's true or not.

But I see trying to keep up that yard a bit as a tiny measure of supporting our troops. Besides, weeds are indiscriminate. They see no difference between my neighbor's abandoned property and my cultivated garden.

If I let weeds choke my neighbor, how long before thy choke me too?

But again, a pesky Scripture verse sprang into my head as I weeded, the place in the *Song of Solomon* where the girl laments that she has tended other people's vineyards, but, “Mine own vineyard have I not kept”.

Maybe so...

But I don't need no girl to change my tire!



Friday, September 13, 2013

Sic transit gloria mundi... a Friday Rerun

This rerun comes from page 200 or my book *A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad*. I first posted it on October 11, 2005

Several years ago I gave a speech which was given extensive coverage by the newspaper and the four local tv stations.

The following day an official of the church we then attended called.

"Did you see me on tv," I asked.

"Yeah. I saw that. But what I'm calling about is -- the janitor goes on vacation next week. I need somebody to mop floors and clean the toilets while he's gone. So I thought of you..."

I had much the same experience yesterday. Friday I finally published *Glog*. All weekend I have basked in that accomplishment.

And Monday morning I saw that Darlene, my e-friend in Canada, said all sorts of nice things and posted my photo in her blog comparing my masculine physique to that of tv star Ty Pennington (the whimp).

Headly stuff.

Then, my phone rang.

"I see you're finished that book thing. So now you're free to help me shuffle cars to the shop," said the elderly gentleman on the line.

Then someone called needing me to drive them to the hospital.

Then two more callers. One with a simple computer question; one with a historical research problem.

Then an elderly neighbor from a few blocks down the street came by our house wanting me to transport some children's clothing to the mission.

Not having our car, I walked to his house with my wheelbarrow to pick up the bags of clothes. On my way, I saw the garbagemen had dumped the empty cans right in the middle of my next door neighbor's driveway. I moved them so she could get in her drive when she gets off work. A Nuisance Task. "Some people are too sorry to be garbagemen," I grumbled.

As I loaded the clothing bags into my wheelbarrow, the old man's wife said, "The bushes out back are overgrown. Could you come chop them down for us"?

They have grandsons a whole lot bigger and younger than I am, so I asked if the grandsons could do that when they come for supper?



“Oh, I wouldn’t ask them,” she said. “There’s snakes all out in those bushes and they’re scared of snakes”.

I’m not scared of the snakes but I feel that if the grandsons eat there, they can work there. So I passed on that opportunity.

But I feel guilty about it.

I’m all hot to trot on my next writing project and here I am besieged with requests for menial service. Hey, I’m a published author; I’m too good for that dirty hands stuff ain’t I?

No.

No. I’m not.

I can’t write Christian if I don’t live Christian.

Christ died so that I might be saved, not so that I might be important.

A servant is no better than his Master and if He washed dirty feet then I’m certainly not to think myself above doing the same. But I do. In my heart, I do.

Brother Lawrence said that God counts not the greatness of a task but the love with which it is done.

Well, I don’t rack up any Heavenly points in that area either, because although I agreed to do the things the various people needed, I resented being asked to do them.

Remember the Bible story about the guy who asked his two sons to harvest grapes?

One son said, “Sure thing, Dad. I’ll get right on that”... but he didn’t go.

The other son said, “Hell No! I won’t go”... but he trudged on out there and picked the stupid grapes and dumped them in the vat.

I identify with that second son.

You know, if God spoke to me directly, if He appeared to me in a burning bush, (my first reaction would be to grab a fire extinguisher) But if He did speak directly, I think I’d pay attention to what He wanted.

Trouble is, God doesn’t speak to me directly; He always seems to say what He wants through other people.

I mean, not many of us would turn down a direct request from God Almighty.

But, when it’s that pest down the street who conveys the request...



But is it really God who wants me to do goody-goody stuff for people? Is that part of being Christian? Or do I just want to be thought well of? Hey, I was a Boy Scout long before I became a Christian and I had the Scout oath and motto and all that ingrained in me before I ever learned a Bible verse. "Do a good turn daily... A Scout is helpful... To help other people at all times... Trustworthy. Loyal. Friendly..."

When I say yes to folks who ask my help, am I being Christian or just a geriatric Boy Scout?

Then I wonder, are requests for mundane help opportunities to serve Christ, or are they hindrances to the work of writing which I really should be doing?

Are such requests for help just obstacles which keep me from my writing goals? Don't I have an important contribution to make to Christian literature? Why, I have this idea for a world-changing book; I think I'll entitle it: *The World's Greatest Book On Humility* by John W. Cowart.

Doesn't that have a nice ring to it?

Perhaps such nonsensical ideas are one reason God never lets me make the *Times* Best-Seller list. He knows such success would cool my heart, puff my head, and snare my soul.

Am I too high-falutin a writer, too self-important a person, to give help without resentment and bitterness? Can't the little people who have not written a book do those things?

Do I really mean it when I tell Christ, "Yes, Lord. Whatever. Whenever. However"?

Do I intend to be a Christian guts, feathers and all?

Is Christ the Lord of my energy, my money, my time?

Or do I just use Him as a springboard to enhance my own reputation?

Of course then this verse comes to mind: The Lord Loveth A Cheerful Giver.

Damn! I'm supposed to be cheerful too?

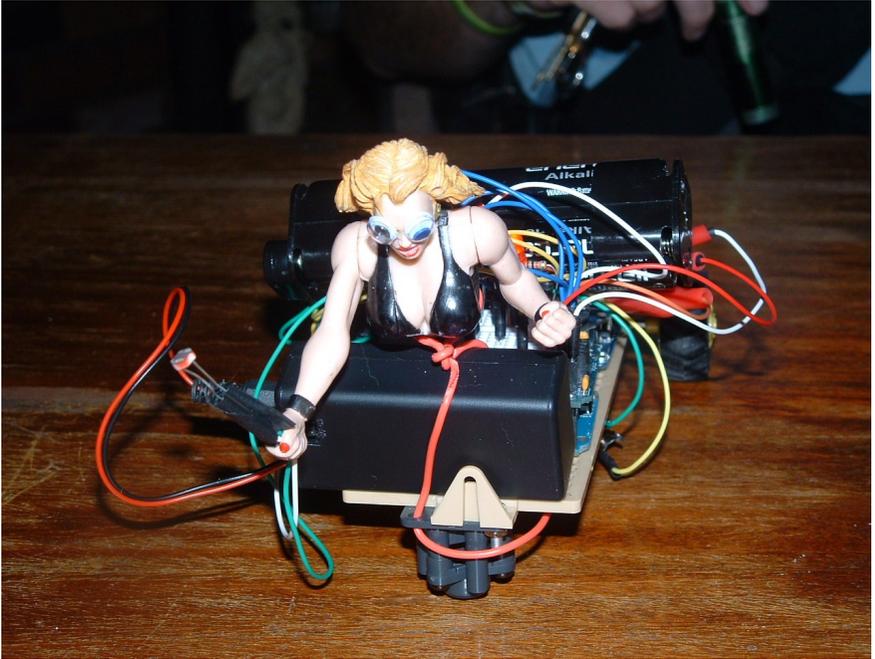
O crap! Looks like I need to take off my shoes, climb in that vat, and stomp those damn grapes –

Cheerful?

That I'm gonna have to work on.



Monday, September 16, 2013
Worship, Monkeys, & RoboRoach



Of 18 people I spoke with last week about attending church for National Back To Church Sunday, yesterday eight showed up for the 9 a.m. worship service.

After a great Chinese lunch at Silver Star, the usual gang gathered in my living room to gab about the sermon, rabid monkeys with VD, and a computerized robot my son Donald is building.

In church, the Rev. Mark Eldridge spoke on what difference Jesus Christ makes in history, in society, and in my life.

He quoted Napoleon, Dostoevsky, and H.G. Wells about the historical significance of Jesus. He mentioned that Aristotle, Socrates, and Plato enjoyed combined careers of 130 years, while Jesus Christ taught for only three years; yet world-wide more people are familiar with the teachings of Jesus than of these great philosophers.

“Jesus does not give a new way of thinking but a new way of being,” he said.

As for society, “Christ’s influence eliminates slavery and elevates children and women,” he said. And Christianity motivated modern science, encouraging us to understand the world. And world-wide more followers of Christ are alive today than ever before. At the Nicaean



Council in 325 A.D., not only did church fathers formulate a creed many of us recite each Sunday, but that same council established orphanages in every parish.

In a field behind one of those picturesque white-marble pagan Greek temples, as an unwanted baby, Socrates had been exposed for wolves to eat till someone who wanted a slave child scooped him up. Mark said that where Christ is worshiped, orphanages, hospitals, soup kitchens, and old folks homes spring up where none have been before.

How can Christ make a difference in my life? There is a broken heart in every church pew. We have been beat up by life, by circumstance, by family, and sometimes by the church. But no matter what you have done, no matter what has been done to you, Christ can make a difference, a difference for the better.

The love of God is shown towards us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

“The same Jesus, who transformed history and society can change us for the better—and He wants to!” Mark said.

“Whoever is a believer in Christ is a new creation. The old way of living has disappeared. A new way of living has come into existence”.

After worship service and lunch, the guys and I lit up pipes and cigars in my living room and talked this stuff over as well, as discussing items in the morning newspaper.

Fred said that a New York paper claims Florida residents are “in a panic” because back in the 1950s monkeys escaped from the filming of a Tarzan movie and have reproduced in Florida swamps and woods. Venereal disease infects these monkeys.

“What's to panic about?” Wes said. “Tell those yankees that we may be Crackers but we don't screw monkeys”.

“Well, most of us don't anyhow,” I said.

Donald brought along this computerized robot thingy he is building to show us. He only spent \$130 on E#*+% chips (ask him) to build this thing which lights up, beeps and and will eventually pay music. It contains sensors which makes it run from light toward the darkest corner of a room.

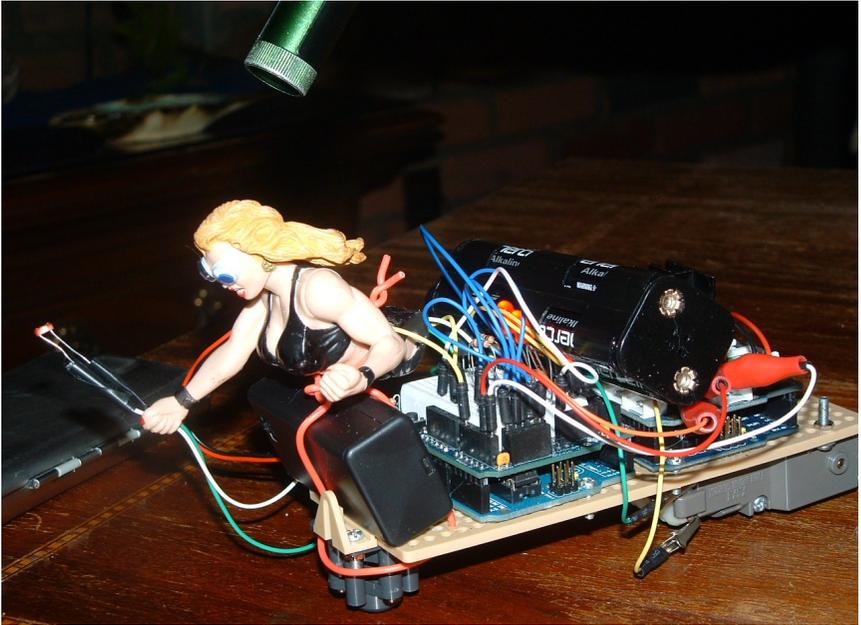
He demonstrated the innards of the creature—*It's Alive, Master, It's Alive*—but he intends to cover these with the pelt of a red fox. But meanwhile, he's mounted a doll as the figure head holding up the light sensor—which we took turns illuminating with flashlights to make it/her run from the light.



My house has free roaches that do the same thing.

“You’ve spent \$130 to build a computerized roach,” I said.

“No,” Donald said, “I spent \$130 to build a computerized roach—with boobs”.



Wednesday, September 18, 2013
I Know How To Walk—Damn it!

Yesterday a stranger stopped me on the street to tell me I do not know how to walk around upright like a human being.

Resentment welled within me.

Of course I know how to walk. I’ve been walking upright for years! My knuckles hardly ever drag the ground.

The young man said he is a physical therapist and he’d noticed me hobbling in pain across the parking lot. He explained that I hold my cane wrong, so wrong that it causes me greater arthritis pain than I need suffer. He showed me the correct way to walk with a cane.

I quelled my resentment and thanked him for his compassion.

His initial approach bugged me because recently I’ve been feeling as though nothing I do is right, nothing I’ve ever done has been right. I feel as though I’ve screwed up everything I’ve ever touched.



I hesitate to write about such depression because Christians are supposed to be happy folk, filled with the joy of the Lord even in adversity. If not, I'd scare off unbelievers with my sourness.

Bullshit.

I'm a Christian and I'm depressed as Hell.

Big deal. So what?

Does God only love happy people?

Doesn't He have place for those of us who can't even walk upright right?

One factor triggering my mood is that Sunday as I visited Ginny's grave again, I realized that I'm forgetting her.

I mean, I sat there in the cemetery for an hour without giving her more than a passing thought. Instead I mulled over car repairs, children, books, and life changes I anticipate.

I hardly focused on Ginny.

And she's hardly been dead for five months.

In our grief counseling session Monday, Hospice Nurse Katie McConnell assured me that it's normal to begin to forget, or to at least lose sight of your dead. You distill the essence, but lose details.

Like when Ginny and I were together, in the mornings, she'd be foremost in my attention; once she left for the office, I'd put her on the back burner and focus on my own work. That's normal. No disrespect intended. But no matter how you love someone, unless they are in crisis or particularly happy about something, you do not think of them all that much all the time.

Also for me, being me, depression lurks just beneath the surface all the time.

And no, I do not take antidepressant medication.

My antidepressants of choice are pipe tobacco and Krispy Kreme Jelly Donuts, the kind with raspberry filling. In fact, I wonder if there's a safe way to smoke donuts in my pipe without the filling catching fire and shooting eight-inch flames up out of the pipe's bowl and singeing my eyebrows—not that I've ever tried that, you understand.

Anyhow, I also wonder why God lets me go through arthritis pain and mental pain and anxiety over my mistakes in life?

This morning's Scripture reading from the *Living Bible* contained the following thought:



“Take a new grip with your tired hands, stand firm on your shaky legs, and mark out a straight, smooth path for your feet so that those who follow you, though weak and lame, will not fall and hurt themselves, but become strong”

Perhaps I'm not the only one who has trouble walking upright right.

Let's keep going together.... OK?

We may not overcome and march in victory to Zion, but we'll muddle through somehow.

Thursday, September 19, 2013
Looking For My Keys

Used to be I'd hop in the car and drive away.

Not any more.

My age and arthritis require an elaborate procedure for getting in the driver's seat.

I unlock the car. I put the key in my pocket while I place my cane where I can reach it. I place my books on the passenger seat. I seat my coffee cup in the holder. I take my pipe, tobacco pouch and matches out of my pockets and place them on the dashboard. I lift my right leg into the car, grab hold of a ridge on the roof to swing myself halfway into the seat. I wiggle forward to lift my left leg in. I shut and lock the car door. I fasten my safetybelt. I reach forward to start the engine... and... Where are my car keys!!!

They are still in my pocket!.

I squirm trying to tease them out so I can drive.

Can't reach them.

I unfasten the seatbelt.

I wiggle and raise off the seat to straighten my leg to get to my pocket.

The keys hang up on my pocket comb.

Nothing for it but to get out of the car, remove the key from my pocket—which should have been the first thing I did—Place the key on the dash, then go through the whole maneuver of getting in again.

Without the key, nothing works.

I can't even click on the windshield wipers unless the key is in the ignition.



The key is the first thing I should have taken care of—otherwise, things get too complicated and I can't go anywhere without the key—it's basic.

Last night I attended a class in basic Christianity.

My life has grown so complicated and complex it's a bit overwhelming. It's like getting in and out of the car every five minutes. And I can't move ahead without a basic key—that's why I enrolled in this course even though I've been a Christian for years.

The church I attend recently offers a class called Christianity Explored; it examines three questions: Who is Jesus? Why did He come? What's involved in following Him?

They have a website at www.christianityexplored.org

Saint Paul was talking about me when he said, “Ye are dull of hearing. For when for 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.

“Ye are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe”.

I fit with that.

No I'm not a Babe, not even a hunk, but I do need to relocate my life keys, my car keys, my first principles.

It's either that, or I may as well just have to start sleeping in my car.

Anything else is too painful and too complicated.

Friday, September 20, 2013

Once Neglected & Rejected, Now Blooming

Ten years ago Ginny and I helped a young man move from one apartment to another. A tattered, neglected, dried-out potted plant sagged by his front door.

“Throw that thing in the garbage,” he said.

Instead, Ginny carried it home. She repotted it. She watered it. She fed it. And as it greened and thrived, she divided the roots and repotted it again and again, before starting it in the ground.

Once neglected and rejected, that single plant spawned red blossoms which now surround our home.

I never see them without thinking of that Scripture about Jesus:



The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes”.

Yesterday I snapped photos of the flowers at the front door:



On the left side of the house:



On the right side of the house:



And in the back yard:



All those came from that one neglected reject.

I also took a snapshot of the angel trumpets and flamingo plants at the pool steps:



And of the new fountain with its yellow rubber ducks:



Everywhere I look beautiful flowers remind me of Ginny's beauty; she will have died five months ago on Sunday.

The flowers also remind me of things in my life which I've neglected, let dry out, and considered worthless. Perhaps I ought to take another look.



Sunday, September 22, 2013
Five Months Ago Today



10 a.m. Monday, April 22, 2013

Monday, September 23, 2013
Collateral Damage

The homeowner ought to have sued Jesus for damages. All the guy did was invite Jesus into his home and look what happened.

Jesus attracted a crowd as usual. Full house. They packed the place out. No police on hand for crowd control.

Here come a crew of Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs). With no ambulance available, these four EMTs constructed a makeshift stretcher and rushed the desperately ill man in for care. When they got to the Great Physician, the crowd blocked their way.

The resourceful EMTs climbed on the roof, ripped off shingles, sawed through beams and rafters, and lowered the sick man in.

Guy got healed. EMTs congratulated themselves on the job and chalked up another save. Disciples marveled. Critics griped.

The crowd of observers--"All amazed and glorified God saying, We never saw it on this fashion". Jesus left to go sailing and to call more disciples...

And the homeowner was left with this gaping hole in his roof.



Who's gonna pay to have that fixed?

Bet that guy is never going to ask Jesus into his house again. Look at all the damage He caused!

This morning I think of this Bible story for two reasons:

- The class I'm taking on Exploring Christianity involves reading Mark's Gospel and chapter two starts off with this incident.
- This weekend a hole appeared in my roof and a chunk of my living room ceiling threatens to fall on my head:



No, Jesus did not puncture my roof. I imagine a falling tree branch did. But I'm left in the same quandary as the homeowner in the Gospel—how am I gonna pay for this hole in my roof?

Jesus gonna pay? He's off teaching heathen.

Disciples? They're off scrounging up a boat for Jesus to sit in to teach by the lake.

The EMTs? The crowd? The Scribes? The Pharisees? The Capernaum Code Enforcement Board?



No. Jesus caused the damage, but the homeowner ends up paying.

(Incidentally, this is not the biblical interpretation which the Christianity Explored folks endorse, but the hole is in my roof, not their's).

Following Jesus causes collateral damage.

Jesus mentioned this phenomena when He said, “Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven. Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household”.

Jesus knew that wholehearted dedication to Him could generate animosity, persecution, financial loss, family troubles—and probably leaky roofs, car breakdowns, unemployment—you name it.

Why else did He say, “Count the cost”.

Following Him costs you... and may well cost those around you.

When fishermen Peter, James and John answered the call of Christ, their dad was left to untangle nets by himself. When Matthew deserted his tax office to follow, a coworker had to stay overtime to balance the books. And what did the undertaker think when Jesus called Lazarus out of the grave—could he still bill the family for funeral expenses?

Jesus disrupted things. Everywhere He went, He caused collateral damage.

Following Him costs.

Jesus warned us that a servant is no better than his Master. He warned that being a Christ Follower means carrying a cross.

Yet, He says it is worth it.

While I bemoan my leaky roof, this weekend, hundreds of Christians were bombed or machine-gunned in attacks on a church in Pakistan and a shopping mall in Kenya. Do their unsaved loved ones think it was worthwhile for them to be Christians?

Maybe not.

Painful things hurt whether you are a Christian or not.

In this world, blessings shower down on the just and the unjust—and so do shitstorms.

But there is more to life than this world.



Jesus knew that when He said, “ Blessed are ye that hunger now: for ye shall be filled. Blessed are ye that weep now: for ye shall laugh. Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you, and when they shall separate you from their company, and shall reproach you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of man's sake. Rejoice ye in that day, and leap for joy: for, behold, your reward is great in heaven: for in the like manner did their fathers unto the prophets”.

Yes Eternity lies just ahead. Right around the next corner.

That's nice.

But I live here and now... and in the meantime, before I face Eternity, I wonder if I can talk the roofer into billing Jesus for repairs?

Wednesday, September 25, 2013

Apa yang Anda Harapkan?--and Buttons

Getting dressed at 4 a.m. Yesterday I buttoned my shirt's second button in the top buttonhole and all day long I worked looking disheveled and whoppajaw.

That's significant.

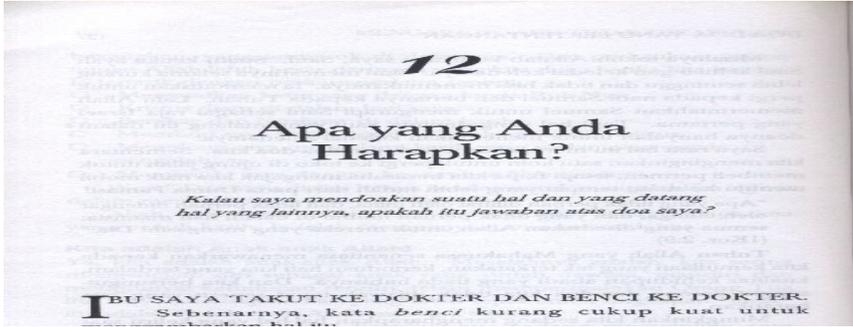
Not that anyone saw me; I work alone.

But I knew something was wrong; but I was busy and I just didn't want to stop and re-button.

Yesterday's work consisted of scanning and formatting an Indonesian translation of a book I wrote on prayer years ago to eventually upload as an e-book. A tedious, mechanical chore that demanded meticulous care. Each of the 191 pages required my clicking the mouse six times to get the thing scanned; then another four mouse clicks to insert the jpeg image into an odt file in precise order.

Not knowing what the Indonesian words on a page mean, I relied on page numbers corresponding between the scanned image and the odt document and the pdf files—because if I screwed up just once, that mistake threw off all subsequent pages and I'd have to restart the whole process again...and again...and again.

Voice of experience there, folks. Here's a sample page (I wrote it years ago in English but I have no idea what it says now):



Between buttoning my shirt lopsided as I dressed for work and re-doing many pages of this manuscript, I see the meaning of something the pastor said in church Sunday. He held up a long shirt with many buttons and said each button stood for something in life.

The top button is God in my life; the second is me; the third, marriage; then work, finances, recreation, etc...

If God is not first, then none of the other buttons align right. He belongs in the top hole, if He's not there, then everything lies off kilter. Nothing works quite right.

Reminds me of my Army uniform back in the dark ages when as I recall the pants' fly sported eight buttons instead of a zipper—challenging when urgent need arose!

Anyhow, the pastor said that when Christ comes first in my life—not just prominent, but preminent—then other areas of life fall into their natural place. Even the holes line up.

And I don't have to understand what's going on in my life for things to line up right! Any more than I have to understand the Indonesian language to follow the page numbers one at a time as they come into view.

I think they call that walking by faith.

I'm not good at it.

But I can paint by numbers.

The rest I must leave up to God because I button my own fly.

I decide which button goes in which hole.

As the prophet Isaiah said, “The Lord still waits for you to come to Him so he can show you His love; He will conquer you to bless you, just as He said”.



Friday, September 27, 2013
Hounded—A Friday Re-Run

The following diary entry comes from page 238 of my book *A Dirty Old Man Goes To The Dogs* (www.bluefishbooks.info); I wrote this on July 31, 2009

My friend Barbara White is up and around after this, her third course of chemotherapy, she has bad days and worse, but yesterday morning she felt well enough to drive to my house and treat me to breakfast at Dave's Diner.

Over breakfast we talked about the 23rd Psalm and dogs.

Barbara noted that the Psalm starts off with the Shepherd leading: "He leadeth me beside the still waters". Here we see the Lord Jesus going in front of us.

But the Psalm ends with : "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me". To follow me means to come behind me.

In one sense the whole picture is that of the Lord compassing us about on all sides—but there's something more.

Barbara recently watched a video of two sheepdogs herding a flock. The dogs ranged back and forth behind the sheep, barking now, laying low then, rushing in, backing off, nipping flanks—dogging the sheep toward the safety of the corral.

The sheep would not ever name a sheepdog, *Goodness*. Sheep would not name one, *Mercy*.

Goodness and Mercy are the names the Shepherd gives to what follows us yapping and nipping at our heels.

Among the sheep, these harassing herders-of-sheep are more likely to be called by names like *Trouble and Aggravation, or Problem and Pesteration, or Misery and Frustration*—any names but *Goodness* and *Mercy*.

But the Lord surely sets them to harry us all the days of our life till we're hounded safely Home.

Those are spiritual observations that Barbara made as we talked. But I made a contribution to our conversation too:

Heard about the dyslexic agnostic who suffers from insomnia? He stays awake nights wondering whether or not there really is a dog.

Barbara groaned.... I wonder if the pain of her cancer is coming back?



**Monday, September 30, 2013
And A Bug Passed Me.**

Saturday in driving rain during the season's first Nor'easter I arrived at Big Talbot Island's sandy beach at 6 a.m. to watch the sun rise out of the Atlantic.

I arrived early to celebrate my youngest daughter's birthday at a family beach picnic breakfast.

Of course, of my six children, John & Fred followed GPS directions to the wrong beach; Eve left her money at home and could not pay the park's admission fee; Donald, Helen, Jennifer, Terri & Brandon called in sick; and the Patricia, the birthday girl, and Rob arrived an hour and a half after the party was to start—all typical of a Cowart family outing.

As daybreak dawned I struggled alone against a brisk wind along the ramp leading to the seashore. Seaots leaned against the sand dunes. Swirls of blowing sand stung my face. I leaned forward pushing against the strong Nor'easter; I could hardly make headway... and a bug passed me.

I marveled that a dragonfly with delicate transparent crystal wings, drew up beside me then passed seaward as though the wind were no obstacle. How could this tiny featherweight creature move against the wind?

Later, I saw a bee do the same thing, flying about its appointed rounds as though there were no wind.

God must have given these tiny bugs more strength and skill than I would have ever imagined. A phrase of a Psalm sprang to mind: They that go down to the sea in ships, these are they that behold the wonders of the Lord.

Then my cell phone started ringing and the family arrived and the magic faded as wonder got lost in happy family confusion as we laughed at Eve and Fred trying to tape a Happy Birthday banner to posts, and guys brought up extra chairs and girls spread a feast of chips, grapes, red raspberry soup, deviled eggs and munchies. Since Patricia is a vegetarian, we honored her stance by eating cow food at this picnic.

In spite of posted shark warnings, the younger and dumber Cowarts swam in the sea, while I guarded purses and clothes in the picnic pavilion. I read a Sherlock Holmes mystery and remembered other happy times at this same beach with Ginny.

In my memory, I think I enjoyed a better time than the kids did in the ocean.



Ginny and I visited this state park beach many times over the years. Once a wave caught us both and swept away both our eyeglasses and we had a devil of a time seeing to drive home.

I remember one time Ginny found a live starfish in a clump of seaweed. To me gulls are gulls, but Ginny could identify five species of gulls and three different sandpipers.

She collected startlingly white angel-wing shells and conch spirals, and scallop shells and purple whelk...

But watching birds and collecting seashells were not our sole beach activities.



That's is a Polaroid I snapped of Ginny back in the early 1970s as another nor'easter swirled sand along the north reaches of that same deserted beach.

That day She wore a silk kimono her brother Jack sent her when he was stationed in Japan.

She wore nothing else.

Not to be indelicate here, but we often teased that we should have named our first baby Sandy.

Thanks Be To God!



Wednesday, October 2, 2013
First Date

Recently, I asked a beautiful young woman out for a date.

It's been 45 years since I last sought a date with a girl, and that was with Ginny, so I'm out of practice in such matters.

However, being the father of six (now grown) sons and daughters I overheard many conversations about dating back when the kids were teenagers. From them I picked up a few pointers about how to go about dating in the modern world.

For a first date in this internet on-line-dating age, everyone says that for a first date, you must meet in a public place with plenty of other people around.

You should have a prearranged signal so that you can identify the person you plan to date—like a spy making contact, you have to wear an ostrich plume in your hat and carry a rolled up copy of the *New York Times* under your arm.

Then, for safety, you always tell some third party where you are going, who you plan to meet, and what time to expect you back.

Always plan an escape route.

Two of my daughters worked out this system: Daughter A went on her date. About 30 minutes into the date, Daughter B would call A's cell phone and say, "My cat is throwing up; can you drive it to the vet"?

If Daughter A's date looked have possibilities, she would tell Sister B, "That's too bad, I'll drive you to the vet tomorrow".

But if the guy looked to be a jerk, a creep, a dork, a total loser, then Daughter A would say into the phone, "Oh, that's terrible, I'll be right there" and she tell the guy, "I have to run now. My sister said her cat is sick; she asked me to drive her to the vet".

That way she could leave immediately.

Here's another tip I picked up years ago from the guys at work:

The first thing I should ask a woman is, "Who did you vote for in the last presidential election"?

Guys said this question is vitally important.

Her voting Democrat or Republican doesn't matter.

But, if she says that she did not vote, that means she may not have turned 18 yet, and I could get into big trouble for even talking with an underage girl!



Oh, yes—and for a first date, always drive your own car. Don't ever get into a car with someone you do not know well.

Back before she met me, Ginny went on a date with this guy. They parked and when she refused to put out, he got aggressive. They struggled. She fought her way out of his car, and in a huff, he drove off leaving her stranded in an unfamiliar section of Southeast Washington, D.C.—even then known as a high-crime area. Ginny found herself in the middle of nowhere in the middle of the night.

In that long ago age before cell phones, Ginny walked for blocks searching for a pay phone. None to be found. She finally came upon a fire station where she could call a girlfriend to come pick her up.

Armed with such tips, I worked up courage and asked this beautiful young woman, who is far out of my league, for a date.

She said yes! She agreed to meet me when she got off work.

I would not have to wear an ostrich plume because I've been superficially acquainted with this young woman for years through various business dealings. Whenever Ginny and I would visit her office, this woman appeared to be kind, gentle, and intelligent.

Maybe that's just her work persona. She seems nice, but I know nothing about her outside her work environment.

I asked her to meet me in public place—a coffee shop. And she would drive her own car to meet me there.

She said actually said yes, that she'd like to meet me at this certain time.

That evening I waited, sipping coffee, for three hours.

She never showed up.

Next day, concerned about her, I went by her work again. She explained that late clients had come in and she was tied up with them for hours and she did not have my phone number to let me know she needed to break our date.

But we did exchange phone numbers.

All this leave me off balance.

I do not understand modern dating.

I mean if she had not wanted to date me in the first place, all she had to say was “I don't want to” and I would not have pestered her further.

But, the next time I asked her out, she laid her hand on the back of mine as she explained she is too busy this week, but we'll try for our first date again sometime soon.



So, I asked her out for a third time; and I don't know if I've struck out now because she said she'll let me know about this one.

I like her very much, I think she's nice, but I still know virtually nothing about her. I don't even know if she voted; I'll have to ask her that if we ever do get together.

Because yes, I do still hope to take her out on a first date any day now—as soon as she gets free from driving her sister's sick cat to the vet.

I Need Answers

Man that is born of woman is few of days and full of troubles. That's what the Patriarch Job said.

What did he know? He didn't even own a computer.

My system broke down again last week—a frequent occurrence practically every time it rains.

With many calls and much waiting and several visits by repairmen, I'm up and running again. Thanks be to God and to my crack online computer support service:





The same rain that knocked out my computer again, also came through my living room roof. Yesterday, I phoned my sister-in-law in Maryland for her wise advice about dealing with that. I expect the roof repairman out to give me estimates this afternoon.

Yesterday also I spoke with that young woman about a possible date in the near future. I also talked with Mrs. McConnell at Hospice about my recent grief manifestations. I answered e-mails from people with problems. And I pondered what order I need to follow to deal with my own problems.

Too many things all at once.

Recently I've pushed hard to shape 35 book manuscripts into e-book formats. The German translation of the book I wrote on prayer proved to be a real bear! I think I'm going to have to start from scratch again.

I've also put out feelers about other foreign language translations—nothing happening there yet. But I hope it will.

Then, decisions face me about church, charity, retirement, garden, health, and finances. Makes me want to go live in a cave.

Sunday the Rev. Gary Blaylock told a great joke as he spoke in a well-prepared message about Christ being first in my life. He said that we all have problems. Jesus didn't die on the cross to make me comfortable. "In this world you will have trouble," Jesus said, "But, take heart, I have overcome the world".

The pastor emphasized that Christ is the answer—most often the unexpected answer. He may heal. He may send a check in the mail. He may remove me from a situation... but most often He gives me strength to endure and live with my troubles.

So, the pastor said a Sunday School teacher asked the kids to answer a question, to name the animal he described: "It is small and furry and has a bushy tail. It climbs trees and eats nuts—what's the answer"?

The class sat silent till one kid ventured, "I started to say it's a squirrel, but I know the answer is Jesus!"

Thursday, October 3, 2013
I Never Worry!

I never worry.

I never lie either.

Do you believe that?



Jesus said, "Look at the birds! They don't worry about what to eat—they don't need to sow or reap or store up food—for your heavenly Father feeds them. And you are far more valuable to him than they are".

Jesus said not to worry, so I never do.

What I do instead is project possible future outcomes for present situations; I evaluate my limits and resources; and then I envision and develop effective strategies to deal with any contingency.

But I never worry.

Won't the Lord be just tickled pink with me?

Yes, my method of not worrying has averted many potential disasters which never happened. I stand as a true man of faith.

Case in point: during the heavy rainstorms last week, water came in through an unseen hole in the roof and ran down my living room walls. Plaster bowed from the ceiling threatening to fall.

Now, I've heard tales of how unscrupulous contractors rip off homeowners with leaky roofs. Florida breeds such folks like sandspurs and mosquitoes.

I projected a future outcome concerning roof repair which involved 2nd mortgages, liens, and my ending up living in the dumpster behind Wendy's.

I called Carol, my sister-in-law in Maryland, to determine if I should cash in Ginny's savings bonds to pay for extensive roof repairs.

I developed a strategy to save money—in fact I planned to earn big bucks by my potential scheme!

All I'd have to do is Not Repair The Leak!

What I'd do is let it leak for 8,000 years, then I could charge tourists admission fees to my living room to view the stalactites and stalagmites which by then would have grown from my ceiling.

As it turned out, I do not have to go live in the dumpster. I do not get to charge fees like they do in Carlsbad Caverns.

Instead, I contacted a professional roofer, Jacksonville's [Gil Cloutier Roofing Co.](#)

Ryan, the young man from that company showed up at my door when he said he would. He climbed on the roof, swept away leaves from the overhanging oak, and gave me a cost estimate for repairs—which proved much lower than anything I had imagined.



Ryan said an oak limb had fallen on my roof straight on—like an arrow shot from a bow. It pierced through shingles, tar paper and plywood. It left a hole about as big around as a silver dollar coin.

Ryan fixed the damage in a jiffy.

Then he came inside and we talked about the wonders of the Lord Jesus Christ for a long time because Ryan too is a Christian. I had a great time with him and I learned a lot about his teaching Bible to seventh graders at his church.

I also learned that the Lord is in control of roofs and weather.

See, it does pay to be a man of faith like me and not to ever worry about anything... Even stalagmites.

Friday, October 4, 2013
The Fingerprint: A Friday Re-Run



The following diary entry comes from page 194 of my book *A Dirty Old Man Goes To The Dogs* (www.bluefishbooks.info); I wrote this on **July 4, 2009**.

O but Ginny and I had such great fun Friday!

At least one of us did.

You see I've decided to transcribe and publish that 1854 diary by William F. Short that I found last week. So I set up templates and formatting. Then I recruited Ginny to type the text as I deciphered it and read it to her. How exciting!

What fun!

Trouble is, over the last 155 years the tiny pages got wet. In places ink blotches obliterate the text. In other places exposure to sunlight fades the ink. And even when the writing is visible, the ancient Spenserian script with colloquial abbreviations...

Have no fear, John Cowart is on the track of diary writer, William F. Short... Ginny observes my obsession with this project and laughs at my glee. I feel like the cartoon bloodhound, Officer McGruff, a figure which the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office used to use to teach school children



about safety and crime prevention. The trench-coat wearing hound tracked clues with a magnifying glass like Sherlock Holmes. He always got his man.

Ginny observed as I checked the Library Of Congress Prints & Photographs Division for possible pictures to illustrate the diary. She watched as I groaned my way through the Illinois State Archives till I discovered Short's marriage license. And, I may have uncovered his burial place, and I'm hot on the track of his Civil War records...

Say, could the diary have ended up here in Jacksonville, Florida, because he was one of the damnyankee invaders who overran my hometown during the war? I'm looking into that possibility.

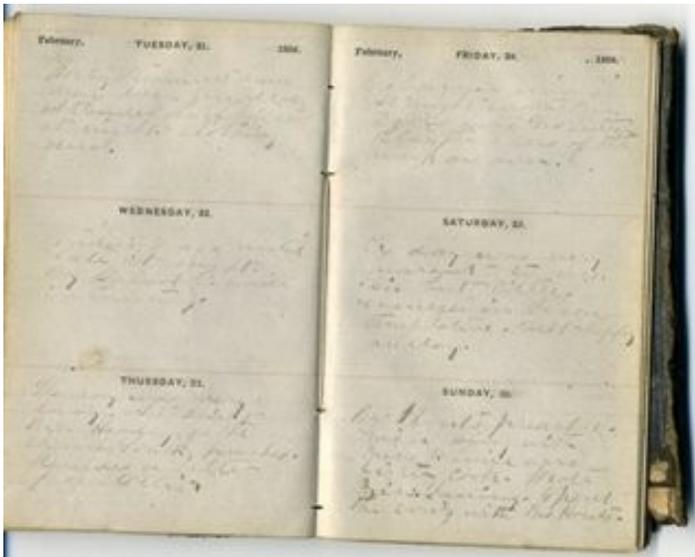
Ginny said I show more enthusiasm about transcribing Short's Diary than I've shown for any project in months.

Anyhow, as Ginny and I played History Detective, my search for clues may have gotten a little out of hand. And she may have gotten a tiny bit exasperated with my obsession.

She doesn't love fun as much as I do.

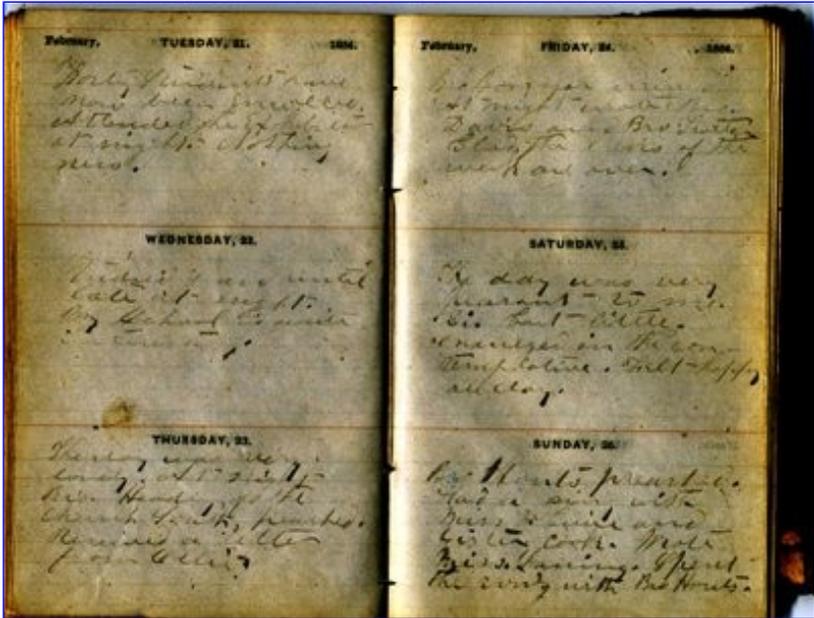
Here's the process I followed after she gave up being amanuensis on my quest and sulked in her rocking chair for a while then went into the bathroom to shower ...

First, when I scan one of the little book's 3 by 4 ¾ -inch pages, say the section for February 21 to 25, 1854, it looks like this:





I scan each page three times—in color, in black & white, and in gray scale. By enlarging the scanned page 200 times, and by adjusting contrast, brightness and mid-tones while zooming in and out on a single word, and by comparing the three versions, I come up with something like this:



With a bit of guess work I can decipher much of that text....

But, what's this? I see a clue!

Look carefully to the left of that red line between February 22nd and February 23rd—Do you see it?





Yes, William F. Short got ink on his fingers that day—that's his thumbprint on the page!

Wow!

Isn't that exciting!

Wow!

Those wimps on *CSI-Miami* can eat their hearts out with envy; I retain my title as King Of The Geriatric Geeks!.

When I saw the fingerprint, gleefully I ran and got Ginny out of the shower. I grabbed her hand and pulled her into the living room, naked and dripping, to show her the enlarged thumbprint on the computer screen.

"You drug me out here for THIS!"

The woman has no sense of history.

Well, my project is not exactly like piecing together the text of the Dead Sea Scrolls but I find it exhilarating.

Other women get to marry men who only drink, gamble, and chase bar girls, Poor Ginny had to marry one who obsesses over old diaries!

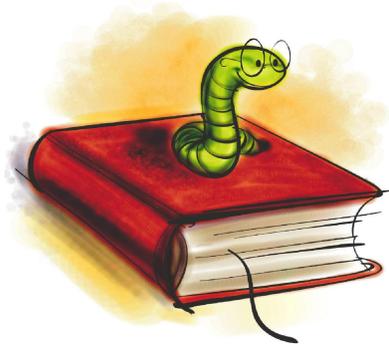
But she only acts exasperated.

From the way she looks at me, kisses me, and hugs me, I think that even after 40 years of marriage, I still amuse her.

I'm so thankful that God put me into her life; and that He let this little diary fall into my hands.



Monday, October 7, 2013
Bookworms Rejoice!



Bookworms rejoice!

Now, 30 free e-books are available on my blog sidebar.

These books represent things I have written, edited or published via my Bluefish Books imprint. Readers can download them as pdf files with no strings attached. No sign-in. No registration. No e-mail address required. And, best of all, no charge whatsoever.

Donations to my coffee fund would be nice but not necessary; all books can be downloaded free. All you have to do is click on the book link in the catalog and the books you want are yours to enjoy.

My own favorite on this list is *Glog... A Dinosaur Novel Of Sorts*. Writing that book satisfied me. It comes under the heading for Science Fiction & Fantasy. The first book I wrote, *The Lazarus Projects* falls under that same heading.

The free e-books offered reflect my interest in old diaries. Titles include *Rebel Yell*, the diary of a Confederate soldier; *Seeking A Settled Heart*, the diary of a Puritan preacher in the 1600s; *The Way Out*, autobiography of a former exotic dancer; and *My Most Amazing Year*, the diary kept by a schoolgirl during the first year of World War II.

Under the heading of Inspiration is award-winning journalist Barbara White's *Along The Way* series which have helped thousands of people walk with Christ.

My own diaries in my *A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad* series help me cope, if no one else. I still laugh when I read my own jokes.



History books included *Crackers & Carpetbaggers*, a history of Jacksonville, Florida; *Heroes All*, the story of fire fighting in my hometown; and *Adventist*, which records the memories of a 99-year-old man, an ancestor of Wes Bassett who transcribed and edited the copy.

Titles also include *Strangers On The Earth*, a collective biography of people whose faith got them into trouble; and *I'm Confused About Prayer* written by the world's foremost authority on praying for things and not getting them (that's me)). That book comes in English, German, and Indonesian translations.

Bunch of other books offered too.

To find all these electric book treasures look at the top on my blog sidebar for the picture of the reader on the ladder getting struck by lightning. There's an e-link to the free books right below that picture.

I hope you enjoy reading my work.



Sunday, October 6, 2013 Put In My Place

Before church Sunday, as I sat smoking my pipe beneath a shade tree near the parking lot, I chatted with a guy who has been a Christian for only two years.

A man with a physical ailment hobbled across the parking lot to approach us.

The man requested prayer.

Not from me, but from the new Christian.

I thought I might join them in prayer, but the afflicted man waved me aside saying he wanted “a spiritual person” to pray for him.

So the two of them bowed their heads and joined hands to pray for healing, leaving me sitting there puffing my pipe.

To my credit, I did not pray, *Lord, break his other leg too*—but I wanted to.



Wednesday, October 9, 2013
Forgiveness... And A Mad Slasher

Recently I have been exposed to thoughts about forgiving and being forgiven. Input from family, church, friends, reading, the Hospice grief counselor, Scripture, and a great mad slasher movie on Netflix—all contribute to my thinking.

Not that I need forgiving, you understand.

I'm one of the good guys. I identify with the Elder Brother in that parable about the Prodigal Son, he's the creep who left the farm, pissed away the money, and ended up living in a pig sty. The Elder Brother stayed home, tended the farm, did everything right, and got diddle-squat for his goodness.

The Father welcomed the Prodigal back by hugging him, giving him a ring, killing the fatted calf for roast beef, inviting friends, and throwing a BBQ party.

Elder Brother working in the fields didn't even get a cold hot dog.

Pastor Eldridge told that familiar story in church Sunday. He said, "Broken people produce broken relationships" and that my resentment and my not forgiving those who do me dirt is like "Drinking poison and hoping the other person will die from it".

Forgiving the bad guy may not restore the relationship but it frees me. Forgiveness does not need the other person to confess his wrongdoing. But the release of emotional hurt comes from the Holy Spirit. Otherwise, holding on to resentment festers into a raw wound of bitterness that cripples me. And unforgiveness spills over into other relationships.

I am to forgive because Christ forgives me.

Why should He?

I ain't done 'nuting! And ain't nobody can prove I did!

Lease ways nothing I'll admit to having done.

But Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

We Elder Brothers have trouble with that idea.

Once my boss promised me a job promotion as soon as it opened. But, his Big Boss was a do-gooder Christian who visited prison as part of his religion. Big Boss had compassion on this bank robber scheduled for release. Big Boss brought this ex-con, who had accepted Christ in jail, into the company and placed him in the job I'd been promised, a job I'd worked toward for years.



Did I rejoice at the restoration and promotion of my Christian brother who'd been lost and was now found?

Not exactly.

Worse yet, this ex-con with no experience, no training at all, did a better job in that position than I could have done. Secretly, I wished he'd choke on fatted calf.

Now, who needed forgiveness most, the jailbird turned Christian, or me the good guy who has never been to jail yet?

Forgiveness is the undeserved overlooking of error.

Christ often said, "Your sins are forgiven; go and sin no more".

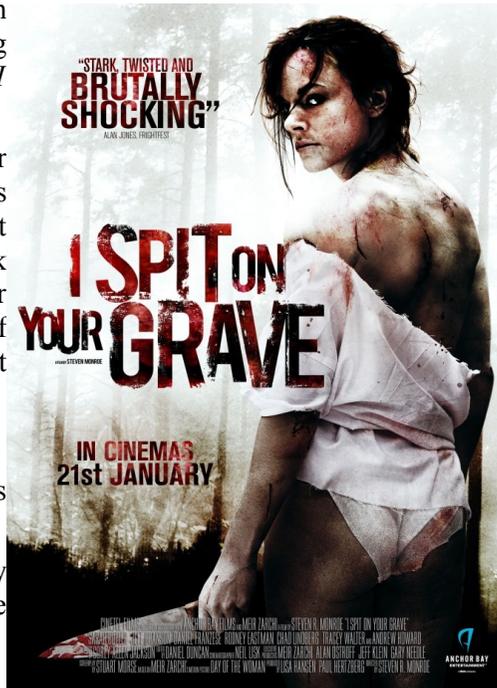
Only God can do that because, at root, all sin is my apathy toward God's chosen king. Sin is my ignoring the wishes of the God who created me. Only He can forgive sin, and only His action inside me enables me to forgive others.

Sunday night I watched an edifying film about forgiving others on Netflix; it is called *I Spit On Your Grave*!

It's about this young writer who rents a cabin in the woods where she can write her first novel. Four local bullies break into her cabin, ridicule her writing, and tear up pages of her manuscript. They ought not to have done that.

They annoy her in other ways too.

She goes in to an empty church to pray and decide what she should do.



And she forgives the four guys—at least the pieces of them the cops were able to find afterwards.



Friday, October 11, 2013
Lord, Forgive The Bastards
(A Friday Re-run)

This is my diary entry from January 1, 1993:

Today I prayed a lot about forgiving the people and organizations who have "despitefully used" me. I harbor so much bitterness about the people who have exploited my poverty and ignorance that I had quite a list to take before God. I still feel great hostility toward these folks, especially "Christian" publishers (a term as strange as "Christian whore") and editors who treat writers as near slave labor but forgiving someone else does not depend on feeling nice about them.

Forgiving is an action not a feeling.

I feel as though these people ought to roast in the pit of Hell for ever and ever, yet I pray that they will be forgiven and prosper and not be taken advantage of as they have done to me.

This praying is an act of will.

I feel the same about them after I've prayed as before, but the difference is that, as I've prayed, several instances have come to mind where indeed I have treated others -- especially men who worked for me when I drove the truck and hired loaders -- in as shabby a manner as I have been treated. Since I am in the midst of forgiving, I can with assurance ask for forgiveness. Until I began to forgive the "Christian" publishers and editors, I had conveniently forgotten the occasions when I have been the one to be unjust.

Do I feel warm and cozy about forgiving others?

Not at all.

My prayers today caused me to remember a lot of slights, indignities and outright cheating I have been victim of from Christian publishers. It would be dishonest to pretend that these self-righteous bastards are not religious scum. My forgiving them does not change the fact that they are puke. It does not change the fact of my outrage in having to deal with them in the future. Praying for a skunk does not make you want to cuddle one. But, nevertheless, they really are forgiven, this is a spiritual transaction.

The best thing to come of the day's prayers is my keener awareness of my own sins against others -- God, I must have been a prick to work for!

Well, Lord, suffer not the wages of the laborer to be kept back by fraud (or by shrewd business practices) and bless the efforts of sober and



honest industry, and, on the other hand, bless the religious publishing industry too.

Today, Gin, Eve, Donald & I attended Carol's birthday party. I talked with Eddie, her elderly father, about his breathing machines and his love of western novels. Afterwards, Gin & I went for a walk on the beach in beautiful weather.

Trying To Comfort A Kid

I wrote this diary entry on February 4, 1992:

This morning after breakfast at Moore's, Gin & I picked up Food Stamps -- with no hassle at all for a change.

After working all night I should have gone to bed then, but I was so enjoying Gin's company that I drove out to Winn-Dixie with her for grocery shopping.

This evening, Patricia told me she needed to talk with me. Poor little thing, she's having problems with math and music at school as well as with some of the student and teacher clods there. Kids tease her and hit her in the gym locker room; the music teacher shines a spotlight on her whenever she makes a mistake playing the recorder and the kids point and laugh.

Heretofore, Patricia loved music and looked forward to learning to play the piano, but this teacher has spoiled it for her (I've seen this sort of thing happen over and over in our "educational" system in that the schools ruin a kid's love of reading, science or whatever.)

Patti & I had talked about some of this stuff during our outing Saturday and I'd asked her to think of ways we might relieve some of the pressure; she came up with three suggestions tonight:

1. She'd like to be taught by us at home.
2. She wants a math tutor.
3. She wants to talk with a psychologist.

I responded:

1. The home school is out for now, at least till Ginny finishes college, then we'll see.

2. I will send a note to school Thursday to enroll her in a math tutoring session.

3. I will call church tomorrow to make an appointment for her to talk with a counselor.

In addition, I advised her that some things in life simply must be endured. The next eight weeks of the music elective fall into that



category. I do not know how to help her with that; but the next scheduled elective for her is Latin and I will work with her on that subject.

I am getting her a book on memory tricks to help her with the math and science formulas. (Why the hell don't they teach that in schools? along with speed reading, research techniques and stuff the kids can use to learn on their own??? Education comes in spite of schools!)

I arranged for her to take tomorrow (which promises to bring super rain storms and a cold front anyhow) off from school. This will give her a touch of immediate relief.

I told her a little about needing the sheer discipline of some studies in order to go beyond them to the things you really want to learn.

I agreed to write an affirmation for her to say three times daily to build her confidence and self esteem.

I held her in my arms on my lap and prayed aloud at length for her as she wept her heart out over the -- to her -- insurmountable problems.

I promised her that as long as I'm alive, I'll be there for her -- whether I can help or not, I'll at least always be available for her to tell her problems to.

God! but the world system of sin and degradation makes me sick. How well I remember my own school days in hell. It pains me to see her pain -- and to be reminded of my own. God only knows if any of these steps can help her; enduring is the answer to most of it.

Monday, October 14, 2013

I Missed The Train

The beautiful young woman I had asked to go out with me (see October 2nd entry) chose to do something else that day.

I intended to treat her to a day trip aboard an excursion train to see Autumn leaves, pumpkin patches, and sheaves of harvested corn standing pyramided in farm fields. I would have arranged for us to ride in the locomotive cab so she could blow the whistle and ring the bells—maybe even drive the train under the engineer's supervision.

Then, we'd have lunch at a restaurant overlooking the river and browse in an antique shop where I'd buy her a souvenir of the occasion.

It would have been a fun day to talk and get acquainted because we hardly know one another. Who knows, things might have clicked between us, we'd enjoy other dates, we'd have fallen in love, and eventually married. I was open to such possibilities. She is the only woman I've met I would even consider in such a light.



But she chose to do something else instead of go out with me.

I'm disappointed but not devastated.

This was the third occasion my dating plans with her have derailed. I've swung and missed the ball three times. I take the hint; three strikes and I've struck out. I'll probably not ask her out again—or anyone else for that matter.

I really have no interest in any other woman.

I imagine I've misinterpreted this lady's professional business kindness—we've only met at her work—for a personal interest toward me. Women in careers which require public contact—nurses, receptionists, counselors, stewardesses—probably run into this situation often where their on-the-job niceness is taken more serious than intended by clients.

I probably read too much into her intent, thinking her professional interest was personal toward me. She seems to have an understanding heart.

And, she's stacked.

In my pipe dreams...

Well, best not to go there—even though I'd already mentally outlined plans for second and third dates with her, picked out the jeweler where I'd buy the engagement ring, and considered the horrifying logistics of a wedding and moving her into my home...

—I'm insane!

We never even had a first date!

But my mind tends toward long-range planning.

This non-dating experience taught me two lessons.

One—the marriage Ginny and I enjoyed together was such a pleasant, good, happy, fun, joyous experience that I'm not adverse to the idea of re-marriage per se. Although I do enjoy leading a happy, celibate life by myself in peace. I can be happy living so the rest of my days. But I also suspect the lady who said no and I might have enhanced life's enjoyment for one another.

Two—I've learned to be cautious about my pipe dreams. My natural inclination was to push matters, but I've prayed that the Lord would help me not to manipulate things to achieve what I imagine would be a worthwhile goal. I'm learning to bide His time.

Time to move on.



Romance would have been delightful, and this was the only woman I've thought of in that light. However, for the third time now, she's made a different choice about seeing me socially.

She has no idea what she missed.

Nevertheless, I think it might have been fun to ride up in that locomotive cab—I keep remembering this old poem:

I do not get to drive the train,
The whistle I can't blow.
I have no say in which way,
Or how fast the train will go.
I can not pull the throttle,
I can not ring the bell.
But, let the damn thing jump the track,
And guess who catches Hell!

Monday, October 14, 2013
A Vast Commitment

Yesterday, I decided not to apply for membership in the church I've been attending.

I went to a 3-hour inquirers class fully intending to sign the application but at the last minute, I balked.

Just not ready to commit.

I am a Christian, but until recently I had not attended any church meetings for years. Ginny and I had planned to begin attending after she retired, but her health and death precluded that intention. And after she died I decided to pursue our original intention. At least, I am going to Sunday worship with other people now, but I decided against applying for full membership.

I'll stay on the fringes.

One fringe that interests me—my youngest son, Donald, feels a heart-tug to start serving breakfast to an encampment of poor people nesting homeless, living under sheets of plastic, in the woods near the church building.

Donald asked me to help lay groundwork for this ministry. He hopes to begin by November 1st. I do not know how much hands-on work I can do in this project, but other Christian volunteers are coming on-board so I'll help but I think I can stay on the fringes of this ministry too.

Speaking of the woods! Wow! Yesterday, Donald helped me reserve my own place in the woods for a few days next month.



I'm really looking forward to that.

No, I won't be camping under a sheet of plastic—I'll have a luxury cabin in an isolated state park alone to cogitate and decide where in life I want to go from here.

Earlier this month, finishing that project of posting free on-line e-books on my blog sidebar (see the October 7th posting) depleted me to the point of exhaustion. I have no energy left, and no ambition to take on any new project.

Besides, Ginny's death hits me harder now than it did at first. I'm realizing more and more that she was the only person in the world who understood me—and approved.

During the inquirer's class yesterday I realized that church membership called for a vast commitment on my part.

And, since I'm only a half-vast Christian, I decided not to apply.

Tuesday, October 15, 2013

Pontificating

Last week two young writers sought my advice about research and writing.

Bright-eyed and bushy-tailed they enthuse about the books they envision and they asked me to reveal secrets to help them as writers.

I envy their enthusiasm and energy. Once I too bubbled with ideas and prospects.

Not recently.

I feel a burnt-out case having tried and failed again and again.

If they realized how little success I have as a writer, they'd pursue a more gainful, stable occupation like scratching off lotto tickets.

If I'd begun as a counterman at McDonalds when I was their age and stuck with it, I'd be financially secure compared to now.

However, I hope my council helps these new writers avoid pits I've fallen into over the 40 years I've been freelancing. At least I serve as a bad example revealing byways leading away from success. And I've pointed them towards better writers who may be of realistic aid in their careers.

In talking with these young people in person and by e-mail exchanges, I've been nudged toward getting back to work on that Second Seminole War novel I began back before Ginny was diagnosed with cancer. The labor of caring for her consumed my every bit of strength... but that's no



excuse for my present lassitude. I was a lazy bum before she ever fell ill. Since her death, I've only dabbled at clerical tasks like posting those e-books on my blog. I've done nothing creative, no real work.

Perhaps the Lord let these folks cross my path not to help them, but to spur me to get off my ass and write about the 1840s tragedies of that time of pioneers, greedy bastards, slave catchers, public hangings, and Indian massacres.

Yes, while I pontificate to young writers, they nudge me towards activity...

But not yet.

Not today.

Wednesday, October 16, 2013
Why? Because. That's Why!

Yesterday morning I began winterizing Ginny's memorial garden, weeding, re-potting flowers, and thinking about the causes of the Trojan War.

As I recall, the Greeks attacked Troy because Paris, prince of Troy, stole Helen, the wife of Menelaus, king of Sparta. Odysseus, Agamemnon, and Achilles battled in the war because they were allies of Sparta. Achilles died from an arrow in his heel because his mother bathed him wrong. The Greeks hid in the wooden horse because Odysseus thought of the ruse. Snakes ate Laocoon because he objected to bringing the horse in the city gates. Greeks pillaged the city and raped Cassandra because they could.

And nobody lived happily ever after.

Except maybe the snakes.

The reason I pondered this outline of the Trojan War was because I began thinking about the word *because*.

What does it mean in my life?

Logically, every effect is caused by something.

My life is the result of the lives of my parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and so on down the line. As the aftershave box says, "If your grandmother didn't like Old Spice, you wouldn't be here today".

Greek philosophers reasoned that since every effect has a cause, if you trace the line far enough back, you come to a First Cause of all effects, the Prime Mover, meaning either God, or the universe per se, depending on your presupposition.



So, the reason I'm in the mess I'm in is all God's fault?

Yes. And no.

“The Scripture says that “Every good and perfect gift cometh from above from the Father of Light”.

Ok. God is good. He gives good things.

But what about crappy things?

What about troubles I consider as evil in my life?

Oddly enough, Scripture says those troubles come from God too.

In her prayer of thanksgiving for baby Samuel, his mother, Hannah, said: “There is none holy as the LORD: for there is none beside Thee: neither is there any rock like our God... the LORD killeth, and maketh alive: He bringeth down to the grave, and bringeth up. The LORD maketh poor, and maketh rich: He bringeth low, and lifteth up”.

The warrior Joshua said “Therefore it shall come to pass, that as all good things are come upon you, which the Lord your God promised you; so shall the Lord bring upon you all evil things...”

The Patriarch Job asked, “What? Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?”

And in the book of Isaiah, God said, “I am the LORD, and there is none else. I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the LORD do all these things”.

That's the sort of thing I speculated as I moved flowers around and weeded Ginny's garden—then the phone rang. I had varied my routine this past weekend, and today five friends or family members checked to see if I were ok without adult supervision.

Nice to be loved and well-thought-of, but I can dress myself!

Anyhow, my friend Wes came over and drove me to Judge John Merritt's home where, over pipes and cigars, I asked the the two of them about cause and effect.

All my friends are smarter than I am; they have answers.

Wes and John explained to me about Gottfried Leibniz's ideas on Monadology and about Philosophical Occasionalism... and for some reason about parasites that live only on the lips of lobsters.

I contributed to the discussion by telling them about the video *Jesus Christ Vampire Slayer*, where vampires overrun Los Angeles and Jesus comes out of retirement where He's been practicing karate, and bullies



beat Him up, but the Good Transvestite rescues.... Well, maybe you need to watch it yourself. It's a musical.

From Wes and John, I gather that Leibniz postulated the existence of monadodes, substances programed to act in a predetermined way coordinated with all the others.

Like God set up this Rube Goldberg machine, or lined up millions of dominoes on the gym floor and topped the first one causing subsequently all following effects.

Or maybe God is like a chess master calculating hundreds of possible moves ahead, so that He wins no matter whether I move rook or knight.

And because He is good, even when I'm a loser, all things, even my troubles, work together for ultimate good.

As Joseph in Egypt told his brothers—who had knocked him in the head, stole his clothes, threw him in a pit, and sold him as a slave—“Ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive”.

I looked up Occasionalism to find it is a “Theory about causation which says that created substances cannot be efficient causes of events. Instead, all events are taken to be caused directly by God... The theory states that the illusion of efficient causation between mundane events arises out of God's causing of one event after another. However, there is no necessary connection between the two: it is not that the first event *causes* God to cause the second event: rather, God first causes one and then causes the other”.

IN CONCLUSION: After much pipe smoke, many cigars, and an hour and a half listening to Wes and John explain, I have concluded that the pink flowers will look better than the purple ones over in front of Ginny's birdbath.

Sunday, October 20, 2013 Rituals—Meaningless, But Happy

During my wife's final illness, many people, knowing her love for flowers, brought her various potted plants.

After Ginny died on April 22nd, I gathered these living gifts, cleared and bricked in a flowerbed beneath the crepe myrtle tree in out backyard, and arranged a memorial garden for her.

Last week I spent time refurbishing Ginny's Memorial Garden.

Her gardening shoes nailed to the tree form nesting boxes for house wrens. Ginny asked me to cut a wisp of her hair after she died and drape



that lock on a limb for the birds she loved to use as a nesting material. And the plaque with her name and dates was the temporary marker at her grave; the pot of pine cones came from her grave site at the cemetery. I pick one up each time I visit her grave—no real reason for me to do that, just a ritual reminding me of how much she appreciated simple things like the beauty of a pine cone.



Few of Ginny's plants are flowering at the moment, but, arranged around the birdbath are pintas, angel trumpets, chrysanthemums, peace lillies, begonias, crown of thorns, Christmas cactus, poinsettia, roses, marigolds, morning glories, flamingo plants, hydrangea, and miniature azaleas.





I'd set this memorial garden up in May, but last week I moved everything out, weeded, and refurbished the area. Raking the mulch exposed colonies of tiny bugs. When I took a break to smoke my pipe, a dozen lizards converged on the spot to feast on bugs. Some lizards leaped from nearby tree branches for the feeding frenzy. I'd never seen anything like that before.

After I re-potted the various plants, I put Ginny's Memorial Garden all back together again—a happy task which refreshes my constant thoughts about my wife and the love and happy marriage we enjoyed so much for so long.

Truly I have been blessed by the Lord God Almighty.

Thank You, Lord.

Tuesday, October 22, 2013
Baby-steps and My Totem Pole

All my troubles all my mental confusion, all my frustrations stem from the fact that Jesus Christ is important to me.

If He were not in my life and thinking, then I could bounce along happy free dealing with things as they come along in ways that foster my comfort and well-being.

But when Jesus enters the equation, I have to factor in what God wants as opposed to what I want. That creates conflict and turmoil in my head as I try to figure out how to get what I want by circumventing what He wants for me.

The way of a Christian, like that of a transgressor, is hard.

And the whole mess arises from the fact that while Jesus is important to me, He is not most important. No, I relegate the Lord God to being just one factor, a minor one at that, in my life.

The Creator of the universe sits pretty low on the totem pole of my priorities.

When I strive to fulfill my own desires, I stride forward with giant steps—like in that kid's game *Mother, May I*—when I move toward God, I advance with baby-steps.

Case in point: church last Sunday.

The pastor spoke about God's place in my life. My life and loyalties display my priorities and choices. I always do what I really want to do; I get done what I want to get done—and that is always my own choice.



“You always get the consequences of your choices,” he said; and he asked that I examine what is competing with God for first place in my life? What pulls me away from God? Am I trying to be the hero in the mental movie of my life?

What, if anything, am I committed to changing?

That pastor spoke of the Boggle-Head Syndrome in which I smile and nod my head at the general idea of godliness, but I never move off the dashboard to actually do anything about it. Agreement with the general concept of following Christ without my commitment equals nothing.

Thus, my muddled life and thinking. If the top button on my shirt is in the second or third buttonhole, my shirt is buttoned, but all is whopajaw. Christ is worthy of top spot, not just a spot, in my life.

And the pastor called for my making a choice of full commitment to letting Christ be first in my life.

I thought about my calendar and my checkbook—barometers of what's truly important to me in that they record how I spend my time and my money...

Yep, God sits pretty low on my totem pole.

So I face a choice.

How big a choice?

I hear other people talk about huge dramatic changes in their lives, how Christ cured illness, delivered from sin, solved problems—they could star in an Action Adventure Movie with Bruce Willis.

Yes, grandiose gestures appeal to me. *Behold, I have left all to follow Thee.*

Sounds cool.

But not realistic.

Then I remember the words of the Prophet Jeremiah who said, “Seekest thou great things for thyself? Seek them not...”

In the past I've tried big commitments and flopped.

Oh, I'll enjoy the drama of religion for a few days, then drift right back to where I was and Christ returns to His spot near the bottom of my life totem pole.

For me, that pattern is religious excitement, not life commitment.

What's wrong with baby-steps if they're taken in the right direction?



The Apostle James said, “Draw neigh to God, and He will draw near to you”.

It's not how big the strep is, but the direction you're walking. God counts not the greatness of a task but the love with which it is done.

The Prophet Zechariah said, “Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the LORD of hosts.... For who hath despised the day of small things?”

Normally, right after communion, I slip out the side door of the church so I can grab coffee and walk to the designated smoking area for a pipe. That way I avoid the hand-shakers and huggers and back-patters who cluster at the church door.

As I considered commitment to Christ toward the end of Sunday's service, I decided to change my routine: I stayed put till the end of the closing hymn and the benediction. I moved among the touchy-feely people and waited in line for my coffee and my pipe.

No big commitment there.

Just a tiny choice and a baby-step.

A real choice I was able to keep.

A babystep which inches me a teeny-tiny bit towards the Lord God Almighty.

The Lord Christ who died on the cross for petty little squalid people like me as well as for great dramatic sinners with an exciting story to tell—I think He is worthy of any move towards Him.

This day of small things seems pretty big to me at the moment.

Thursday, October 24, 2013

A Note To Newlyweds

Rikki and Julie married last month. They honeymooned in Paris. Julie's father, who had been at the wedding, died while the couple was in Europe. On returning to the U.S. Julie was severely injured in a motorcycle accident. They e-mailed this news to me yesterday and here is my response to their letter:

Hi Rikki & Julie,

Good to hear from you.

Sounds as though you've had some big hits in a row--wedding, travel to Europe, bereavement, and a motorcycle accident--all combined with the newness and adjustments of married life. Any one of these things alone



creates stress. So, pamper yourselves. Be good to eachother. Put off any major decisions till the dust settles. Do low-key things which give you pleasure. Do nothing more strenuous than feed the ducks in the pond.

Rikki, Julie needs your strength and support now more than ever. Do little things for her to show her your love. I understand that physical therapy, even if all goes well, is a bitch. Make big allowances for eachother.

Ginny died six months ago yesterday. It seems longer. It seems shorter. Oddly enough, her death has hit me harder over the past three weeks than when it first happened. I am going to grief counseling at Hospice, and that tempers some of my insanity somewhat; but the pain looms bigger now than when she first died. The universe seems out of kilter without her. She was the only person in the world who ever understood me. And daily I feel that loss most.

At a recent appointment with my oncologist, he informed me that my prostate cancer is still there, but doing nothing. He said that unless I get hit by a bus, I'm likely to live another ten years. I find that news depressing. What the hell am I going to do for years without Ginny? This is distressing. We both thought I was the one in the home stretch. I'm praying and pondering what I'm supposed to do now.

Don't have a clue.

Yes, all six kids live within ten miles of me, and one or another, or batches of them, check in on me every day. They are too solicitous at times! I'm not that feeble yet.

Mid-November I plan, God willing, to camp out for a week alone at a cabin in a state park. I recharge my batteries in solitude. So I'm really looking forward to that time. I did this at another state park back in May and the time alone really helped me cope (I recorded that experience in my blog under the title "[Can You Grieve on a Segway](#)"--can't remember the exact date--it's in the archives).

The memorial garden I fixed up for Ginny in our back yard is thriving. The various plants there are all gifts different people gave her during her illness. Posted a photo of that the other day. I kept the temporary marker from her grave site when we put in the bronze one.

In other family news: Jennifer's house remains on the market with no buyers in sight. Fred continues homeless by choice and still lives under a bridge downtown. Johnny recently bought a handicap scooter to get around the neighborhood after his traffic accident. Helen just got back from Sante Fe from an artists' convention. Eve and Mark just returned from Dragon Com in Atlanta. Patricia began a desk job at a resort. And



Donald also started a new job earning more money for fewer hours than at the bank.

The big project Donald, Helen, Johnny, Fred, and I are working on involves a pilot program to feed breakfast to a colony of homeless people encamped in the woods (nesting under sheets of plastic) far from any available mission. This is still in the planning stages as we work out the logistics. The target date to start is November 1st and we intend to run a two month trial to see how it works out.

Donald feels God is leading him to do this. Johnny already volunteers at a food pantry for the poor. Fred has experience in mass feedings. Helen thinks we are all crazy but supports us anyhow (she reminds me so much of Ginny). And I'm in it because I have nothing better to do.

Anyhow, all things considered, I have to agree with that poet who said, "Life goes on; I forget just why".

Love, John

Friday, October 25, 2013
Shovels: A Friday Re-run

This diary entry comes from page 217 of my book *A Dirty Old Man Gets Worse*. When I wrote it on **Sunday, June 25, 2006**, we did not own a television set

I own four shovels; two duckbilled shovels and two flat-nosed shovels. My duckbilled shovels are for digging holes; my flat-nosed shovels I use for moving loose materials such as sand. I don't even own a snow-shovel, but I do own a spade. Many people confuse spades and shovels but they are quite different. A spade is a cutting tool used when you are transplanting sod or cutting roots. A shovel on the other hand is used to dig. I also own an entrenching tool; that is a small shovel with a hinged blade which can be used as a hoe; it's handy for work in small spaces. I sharpen my shovels on a bench grinder so the blades are knife sharp and I oil the blades to reduce friction and preserve the metal. Then there are my trowels, which can be classed as small hand shovels and used to ..."

Love is such fun.

Even though we've been married over 37 years, Ginny still surprises me now and then.

For instance, Saturday morning as we sipped coffee outside in the garden she said something I don't recall ever hearing her say before. She said, "I'd like to buy some new clothes. I don't need anything but I'd just like to buy something new".

Cloth plays a tiny small part in our life.



As long as a cloth thing is clean, comfortable, presentable and I haven't burned too many holes in it with sparks from my pipe ashes, I pay little attention to cloth things.

Ginny pays more attention to such things, but not much more.

However, Ginny wanted some new cloth, so we went shopping for some.

She bought four dresses, a jacket, a bunch of new blouses and a lizard-skin handbag.

Poor lizards.

Took a bunch of them to make this bag.

Anyhow, after the cloth stores Ginny took me to lunch at this seafood place where the folks from her office go now and then to celebrate birthdays, retirements, promotions, and such.

As we ate, I was telling her all about some book I've been reading when I noticed that she was not listening to me. She was looking over my shoulder paying intense attention to something that was not me.

I perked up to hear what was so fascinating behind me.

There was this tv above the bar. It was tuned to the Discover Channel. It aired a program about the history of shovels.

That's what Ginny was watching mesmerized.

That's what she was paying attention to — A. History. Of. Shovels.

On television.

Shovels!

I listened for a moment and I said, "I own four shovels; two duckbilled and two flat-nosed. My duckbilled shovels are for digging holes; my flat-nosed shovels I use for moving loose materials such as sand. I don't even own a snow-shovel but I do own a spade. Many people confuse spades and shovels but they are quite different. A spade is a cutting tool used when you are transplanting sod or cutting roots. A shovel on the other hand is used to dig. I also own an entrenching tool; that is a small shovel with a hinged blade which can be used as a hoe; it's handy for work in small spaces. I sharpen my shovels on a bench grinder to the blades are knife sharp and I oil the blades to reduce friction and preserve the metal. Then there are my trowels, which can be classed as small hand shovels and used to ..."

That got her attention.

"John? What in the world are you talking about?" she said.



“I’m showing you that I can be as fascinating a conversationalist as that guy on tv,” I said. “This is the speech I’ll use if I ever want to pick up a woman in a bar where the tv is playing...”

We got to laughing and snorting so hard that the waitress ran over to our table to see what was the matter. She thought we were choking on an oyster or something.

That made us laugh even harder.

Too hard to explain what was so funny.

The young woman backed away wondering about this old married couple holding hands and apparently having an attack of some kind.

Love is such fun.

When we got home, Ginny modeled her new clothes for me.

On hangers in the store, they’re just cloth; on her, they’re beautiful.

Love is such fun.

Tuesday, October 29, 2013

Nothing Doing

Monday, my sons Fred, John and Donald met with me for breakfast and to plan logistics for a feed the hungry project which Donald envisions. He feels God is leading him into this endeavor; I think the rest of us are just along for the ride.

God willing, we serve the first breakfast to the homeless next Sunday.

It excites me a bit to be involved in this outreach ministry—it is something Jesus encouraged His people to do.

Looks like my role in the program will be to act as bouncer; that is, I’m to sit with the guys and defuse untoward situations by letting the homeless vent frustrations to me rather than acting out in less productive ways.

In my past experience with this sort of ministry, rarely have folks become unruly but we are to be wise as serpents as well as gentle as doves.

I think that means I get to bite ankles if anyone misbehaves.

Other than that, the most exciting to happen in my life recently was gassing up the car for less than \$3.15 a gallon as I returned from visiting Ginny’s grave.

O well, Jesus is Lord even when nothing much is happening—maybe especially then.



Thursday, October 31, 2013
Hidden In Splendor



This month the cassia tree at the foot of my driveway blossoms into thousands of yellow flowers with black stamens. Hundreds, if not thousands, of yellow and black caterpillars dwell amid those flowers.

See them?

Take a closer look:





I know they are there. But they are hard to see; I have to search for them. Here, let me catch one:



Yes, God camouflaged the little bugs making them invisible to predatory mockingbirds which would eat them every one. The caterpillars, which are future cloudless sulphur butterflies, would not survive except they be hidden in the glory of the flowers.

The splendor is the flowers'; the safety is the worm's.

Yesterday during my annual physical, Dr. Downey and I talked more about our Christian walk than we did about medicine. As he froze cancers off my right ear, he recommended several books to help me draw closer to the Lord, and we discussed *Practicing the Presence of God*, and *Madam Guyon*, and *St. John of the Cross*.

Dr. Downey prayed with me and he asked, "John, what are the three most important things you want readers to get from your writing"?

"That Jesus is Lord, even when it doesn't seem like it. That we can relax because God is on our side. And that no matter how tough things get, there is hope," I said.

Last night I gave Mark Eldredge, the pastor of the church I attend, a gag gift which I'd picked up from a yard sale. It seemed appropriate because for the past six weeks, he's preached on the theme, *Me Second*,



emphasizing that I'm to be transparent and let God hold first place in my life.

Mark said, "You are not what others think you are; you are not even what you think you are; you are what God says you are".

At the Baptism of Christ—before He had performed a single miracle—the Voice came from Heaven saying, "You are my beloved Son. With You I am well pleased".

Mark encouraged us to place Jesus first because at heart we are grown-up babies--but with different issues. We are good at being bad and all too often the theme of life is, "Hey, Look At Me".

St. Paul told the Colossians, "Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God".

That phrase struck me—Hid with Christ in God.

Like the caterpillars in my cassia tree. God hides me, not to put me down, but to camouflaged me from predators.

And Mark taught that I am to become as a little child to enter the kingdom, not because children are innocent, but because they are utterly dependent for everything on the Adult. As I am helpless and utterly dependent on the Lord.

There are things in this world that would eat me alive...And I am one of them.

That's why it's reasonable for me to deny myself, take up the cross and follow Jesus... I suspect a better translation might be, "Let a man evaluate himself, take up the cross, and follow".

Jesus is not talking false modesty or unhealthy self-denigration, but a realistic view of self. Jesus Christ is a realist. And I am to be hidden, caught up, in His splendor. He is worthy.

Oh, the gag gift I gave Mark with the words, "For when you want to be hidden so others will see only Jesus"... I gave him vestments made of camouflage material:



The Invisible Preacher

And all evening long I've been thinking of that old hymn, popular in the 1890s:

Not I, but Christ be honored, loved, exalted,
Not I, but Christ be seen, be known and heard;
Not I, but Christ in every look and action,
Not I, but Christ in every thought and word.

Oh, to be saved from myself, dear Lord,
Oh, to be lost in Thee,
Oh, that it may be no more I,
But Christ that lives in me.



Friday, November 1, 2013
A Blind Mule

Following Dr. Downey's, my physician's, advice, yesterday I began reading a book first published in the year 1575; a Spanish clergyman, Miguel de Molinos, wrote *A Spiritual Guide Which Disentangles The Soul*.

From the first page—the author hits my nail on the head! Talk about an entangled soul—that's me.

Here I am a Christian believer, but dry, lifeless, discouraged, disoriented, joyless, with no more sense of God's presence than a blind mule.

Now, I can not blame my state on grieving over Ginny's death; I've always been this way. Puddleglum was a giddy optimist compared to me. A Christian feeling empty, depleted, rejected, morose, and ineffective is not a good advertisement for the faith. In witnessing to others, I have more questions than answers...

Sure, repent and turn to Jesus and you can be like me.

How's that for an evangelistic ploy?

Miguel says that souls called by the Lord to the inward way find themselves “full of doubts and confusion; It will seem to thee that God does no more assist thee as formerly”: and that “there will be shame and confusion” and “How much confusion and perplexities will want the enlarging of thy soul... Thou shall certainly conclude that thy soul is out of order”.

He says, “that is a clear sign that the Lord will have thee walk by faith and silence in His divine presence... There when thy soul is dead, dumb and resigned... be silent and believe...be confident and walk on though it seems to thee that thou does nothing at all and are idle being so dumb and resigned, yet it is of infinite fruit”.

The author pictures a blind mule harnessed to a gristmill lever plodding round and round in a circle meaningless to that mule.

Miguel said, “Consider the blinded beast that turns the wheel of the mill, which though it sees not, neither know what it does, yet does a great work in grinding the corn, and although the mule does not taste of the flour, yet its Master receives the fruit, and many people benefit from the mule's trudging labor”.

Babies get fed, working men feast on gravy biscuits before going to work, mother's bake pies, and chefs produce multilayered wedding cakes—and the mule knows nothing of what he has contributed, he only know of trudging around in his dreary circle.



What's wrong with that?

Not a thing in the world.

As a trudging blind Christian mule, I don't need to know anything beyond my own next step. I'm to grind corn for the glory of my Master and the use of people I don't even know.

It must be nice to be a skylark Christian soaring in joy, brightening the world, rejoicing in the Lord, singing glory to God, and crapping on the heads of lowly mules. They have their place in God's scheme of things, but how much corn do they grind?

So the question always before me is *Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?*

The problem ever before me is am I going to balk and kick against the traces or plod in my little circle to the glory of God?

Another subject altogether:

Last night a cute little Halloween pirate came to my door for candy as five of six neighbors sat in my front yard gossiping and telling ghost stories. The pirate reminded me of an old joke:

This pirate walks into a bar and demands, "Wench, brings me my grog"!

The buxom barmaid says, "Avast there, Mate, do ye know there is a ship's wheel stuck down the front of your pants"?

"Aye," said the pirate, "And it's driving me nuts".

Monday, November 4, 2013
Thoughts On Being A Bagel Shill

Saturday I did something Jesus said not to do.

Seemed like the right thing to me.

Yes, I prayed in public, I prayed right out on a public street, and I made a show of it for the old lady's sake and to impress the audience with my sincerity and piety.

What a crock!

Jesus specifically said, "When thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men".

But that's exactly what I did.



Back when we were poor, in September of last year, because of odd adverse circumstances, the way I found food for our household was to stand in a charity bread line at the Lord's Pantry, a grocery distribution site hosted by St. Peter's Episcopal church; I wrote about that experience on September 27, 2012. Our own poverty (No worries now) proved temporary, but for many people it isn't.

Recently, when someone fainted for lack of breakfast during a service at the church I attend (Christ Church, Jacksonville), my youngest son, Donald, caught the vision of feeding breakfast to the poor. He ~~suekred~~ recruited me and his two brothers into the project, which began yesterday.

Saturday, my job was to pass out invitation to Sunday's breakfast to folks standing in the bread line for groceries.

One ancient lady told me about her son in prison for murder. One day he came home from work to find his wife in bed with their landlord, flew into a rage, and beat the man to death with his bare hands... Judge sentenced him—16 years to life.

The old lady cried because her son wanted her to write him in prison but her arthritis crippled her hands so much she can not hold a pen.

When she asked me to pray for her son right out there in the open with a host of poor people watching us, I did. But I felt led to not only pray but to kneel there in the mud in front of her while I prayed knowing full well that people were watching me.

Oh well, I did what I did because I did it.

The real spectacle came when I tried to stand up again because my own arthritis locks my hips and knees in stiffness and I wallow like a beached walrus.

No body said anything but they were all watching me.

I felt like a fool.

Come 5 a.m. Sunday morning, for the first day of the breakfast outreach at Christ Church, this scruffy, group of hungry, shabby tramps gathered at Christ Chur....



Whoa, those aren't destitute customers—those guys are me and Fred and John, gathered there to serve the poor people.

By the way, there was a partial eclipse of the sun during that beautiful sunrise.

The original action plan called for three guys to serve the coffee and food, while I would sit in a back area with poor people giving them wise counsel about their woes and troubles. I was to share the wisdom of my years of Christian experience and enlightenment and impart understanding and hope and...

Donald, team leader, recognized my talents and assigned me to a job appropriate for a Christian of my mature spiritual standing:



Yes, that's me out on the highway, sitting on my wheeled walker, puffing my pipe, waving my sign, pointing travelers the way to a free breakfast—shilling for Christ.

I've found my niche in God's kingdom.

Maybe there is a lesson for me in all this.

Can't learn humility without being humiliated.

But I felt like a fool out there in public, on the highway, waving a sign. I felt ridiculous. Surely there's a better place for my talents, a more productive use of my wisdom, a more effective way to use my spiritual insights...

Or maybe not.



St Paul once said, “Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise”.

“God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty”.

Maybe so.

But I draw the line at wearing a clown suit to draw in customers.

I will not do that!

No. Next time I'll wear a bikini.

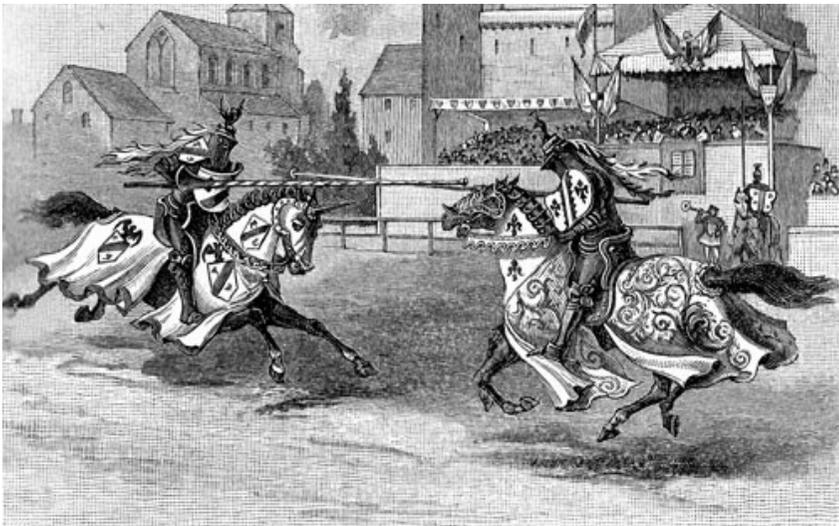
Wednesday, November 6, 2013
Unhorsed. Remorseful. Now What?

About 40 years ago Ginny and I did something which we vowed we'd never tell anyone about ever.

Yesterday I told.

I don't intend to repeat the secret here except to say we intended something good by what we did, but we felt it was so private, so holy that to ever tell would cheapen it.

Yet in a conversation with my friend Wes as we discussed the misapplication of Scripture passages, I blabbed—and immediately felt remorse. I do that a lot—feel remorse.





I ought not to have told that incident even though it fit into the flow of our discussion. So I berated my self over having broken silence after all these years.

Oddly enough, one point of our discussion yesterday revolved around my tendency to beat myself over the head about my sins, faults, failures, and everyday activities. Wes, Ginny, my children, and a number of other friends and counselors have broached this same point, i.e. that I tend to be harsher with myself that any responsible adult would be.

So naturally, when I blabbed and broke my vow after 40 years of silence, I began to whack myself on the head for being vain and untrustworthy. And mentally I tried to justify my breach of promise—with monumental failure.

The initial act had been good; my telling about it was bad; my self-reproach was horrid. Thus I twisted a decent act from virtue to vomit—all in one mental flip.

I wallow in remorse all the time—usually over nothing exciting.

Few art historians know this, but Michaelangelo asked me to model for him when he painted *Remorse* on the underside of that church roof in Rome:





My reading last night brought me to the 17th chapter of the Second Book of Miguel de Molinos's 1575 book [*A Spiritual Guide Which Disentangles The Soul*](#). I've been eating this book up; though I understand less than a third of the deep book, it comforts me and speaks to my condition.

“When thou fallest into a fault, what matter soever it be, do not trouble nor afflict thy self for it: for such are effects of our frail nature,” Miguel said.

“If when thou fallest into a fault or a piece of neglect, thou dost disturb and chide thy self, ‘tis a manifest sign, that secret pride doth still reign in thy soul: didst thou believe, that thou could’st not more fall into faults and frailties? If God permits some failings even in the most holy and perfect men, it is to leave ‘em some remnant of themselves of the time that they were beginners, to keep ‘em more secure and humble...”

“If to morrow thou dost fall again, as thou did’st today, trust again the more in God's infinite Goodness, so ready to forget our faults, and receive us into his Arms as dear Children”.



Drawing on the sporting event of his age, the jousting tournament where an armored knight charged with lowered lance to unhorse his opponent, Miguel said, “Would not he be a meer Fool, which running at Turneament with others, and falling in the best of the Career, should lie weeping on the ground, and afflicting himself with discourses upon his fall? Man (they would tell him) loose no time, get up and take the Course



again; for he that rises again quickly, and continues his Race, is as if he had never fallen”.

Miguel says that the Lord even uses my sins, failings, and faults to lead me to into a closer walk with Him.

“By means of small failings, the Lord makes us know that his Majesty is that which frees us from great ones; and herewith he keeps us humbled and vigilant; of which our proud Nature hath most need: ... if thou seest thy self fallen once and a thousand times, thou oughtest to make use of the Remedy which I have given thee, that is, a loving Confidence in the Divine Mercy”.

A loving confidence in divine mercy—that's what I lack most.

My heart condemns me outrageously over my sins—sins nailed to the Cross on which the Prince of Glory died. Why do I have such a hard time resting in that fact?

St. John wrote, “If our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things”.

He knows that my sin is deeper and darker than I realize, but He also knows that I can't even imagine the height and magnitude of His love for me.

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

Time to get back on that horse.

If we fall a thousand times, it is not fatal, the Lord will bear us up. He's good at what He does.

Friday, November 8, 2013

A Friday Re-Run

Hello all. This is Eve, John's daughter. Dad let me choose the post today. This was originally posted on August 18, 2008 and can be found in print in his book [A Dirty Old Man Sinks Lower](#). My favorite line was the one at the end :)

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 all our prescriptions and renewed the ones that are low. We bought some 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 fell 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, November 12, 2013
Thoughts In The Wee Hours

Had she lived, Ginny and I would have been married 45 years today. I plan, God willing, to spend the morning at her graveside remembering and giving thanks that she was part of my life and I part of hers.

It's 3 a.m. and arthritis pain woke me from a sound sleep an hour ago. For the past couple of days pain pretty much confined me to sitting with my feet propped up doing little, but thinking much.

I've just finished reading Miguel de Molinos, 1575 book [*A Spiritual Guide Which Disentangles The Soul.*](#)

I understand only about an eight of the book's deep ideas and practice less. Most of this is far beyond my experience, yet I find it most helpful especially when it talks about the purpose of self-denial.



Jesus said that a man should deny himself, take up his cross and follow Him.

I've always thought of self denial as an end in itself.

A sort of asceticism, a harsh seeking after self-enlightenment. "Look at me. Wow, what a man! I suffer privations therefore I must be holier than you wimps who don't give up stuff like me and suffer hardship in my quest for God".

What a crock.

Also, I've thought the phrase "my cross" referred to the troubles and aggregations of my daily life that I must put up with—the annoying clerk, the flat tire, the telemarketer, arthritis, toothache, more month than money—you know, the troubles I have to bear just to get by. I once heard a woman speak of her husband as her cross.

All that's wrong. Such things are not crosses but common vicissitudes of life.

Jesus carried His cross for a reason.

He set aside His Godhead and became human for a purpose: to save us and draw us to God.

I am not to put my self down, but to put myself out, for those same reasons: to rescue others and draw those around me closer to God.

Asceticism can lead to pride of accomplishment or even to false humility. Real self denial is not to deny reality, but to deliberately seek the good and benefit of other people. Taking up my cross is not to put up with things that bug me, but to sacrifice myself only in order to draw those around me to God.

The cross of Christ was a wooden mechanism of sacrifice to bring us to God's forgiveness. In His cross we find salvation because of what He did.

The cross we are to take up daily is also a mechanism leading to salvation—not our own but other's.

There was nothing wrong with Jesus that He had to deny Himself.

But He did.

For our sake.

Forgiven there is nothing wrong with you or me that we need to deny. We are what we are by the grace of God. However, we are each



also called upon to set aside our rights and privileges and even our good taste—all our props—in order for those around us to see God in us unobscured by the things important to us in the natural.

Why else any cross?

Now, I'm going back to bed.

Friday, November 15, 2013

**Once I got MY Ass Kicked... And Once, I Didn't
A Friday Re-Run From May 6, 2006**

My e-friend Jellyhead is a physician in Australia. She and her husband have two children. He enjoys birdwatching and captures beautiful photographs; she studies karate and recently earned her blackbelt.

I wish she'd been walking beside me one morning about two years ago; as I strolled home through a nice residential area on a beautiful Spring day about 10 a.m., a man darted out of no where, knocked me down, beat me up, and stole my billfold. I never even saw him till he'd already hit me and knocked me to the sidewalk.

A karate champion would have been a great companion that morning.

Thursday Jellyhead asked me the following question:

Do you really believe in an interventionalist God, John?

Because to me, the idea that God can help us if we only pray to him, or have faith in him, flies in the face of all those children who die from leukemia, or young people who have tragic accidents, or even older people who die awful lingering deaths. Surely if God could change these things, he would. Hence the concept of a loving God who can watch over us, but cannot save us from tragedy. What do you think?

(I understand if you don't want to answer - this is after all a very public forum)

When I read her question the first thing I thought of was two dogs.

About 15 years ago my car broke down and I had to walk to work through a very rough slum section of town. A block ahead of me I saw a six or eight tough really mean-looking guys standing in the street. They eyed me coming and spread out blocking the walkway. Really scary. One of them hefted a bat or pool cue.

I could either turn around and run or keep going because this was the only way I could get to work.



I may have said "O damn!" or said a prayer but I really didn't know what to do.

Suddenly, out a narrow space between the brick walls of a laundry and a bar, two enormous dogs appeared. One black and one white. These two dogs came out like fighter jets in formation and took up station, one on either side of me.

These dogs, each the size of a desk, biggest dogs I've ever seen, looked to neither the left or right but pressed in against my legs and matched me step for step as I walked straight ahead.

The gang of tough guys separated.

These dogs and I walked straight through the two columns of them.

The dogs walked like that with me for another block till we came to Springfield Park where both dogs peeled off and ran, disappearing into the distance.

They had never sniffed me or even glanced at me.

Do you really believe in an interventionalist God, John?

I have to answer: Sometimes.

But I'll have to qualify that by saying that the Lord intervenes in human affairs at His pleasure, not mine.

He is, after all, sovereign.

So, I wonder why, or even if, God protected me by sending those big dogs that one time, but let me get my ass kicked that other time?

I mean in the light of the bad things that happen every day, how can we believe in a loving, all powerful God who lets, or causes, terrible things to happen to His children?

If God loves us, then why does He allow terrible things to befall us?

If God is all powerful, then why doesn't He stop bad things?

Is it a case of either God does not care about us --or, if He does, then is He too weak or too far removed to do anything about it?

I do not have an answer.

What I do have is a couple of thoughts that help me believe in Christ and trust Him even though I do not have a definitive answer.

Yes, *children do die from leukemia, young people do have tragic accidents, older people do die awful lingering deaths.* There are deformed babies, wars, cruelty, cheating, bullying, debt, abuse, liars, adulterers, frustration – Suffering in varying degrees touches every person's life.



And if we don't die first, we face Alzheimer's.

It's not a pretty picture.

Why doesn't God intervene?

How exactly would I want Him to do that?

Well, first of all I'd like to live in a garden. A beautiful place with flowing springs, singing birds, peaceful animals, fruitful trees, blooming flowers - no thorns. A place where my beautiful wife and I could romp naked in the forest and roll happy in the grass. No thorns, no sickness. No troubles. A place where in the cool of the day God would come and walk with me and talk with me and listen to me and ...

Oh. Oh. Oh. — He's already done that.

That's the life He had in mind for us from the word go.

But we chose otherwise.

Our president decided he had a better idea; he decided that humanity could actually be like little gods. Instead of worshiping and obeying and enjoying the Creator, our first leader rebelled and changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshiped and served the creature more than the Creator.

St. Paul said, "Even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient".

In other words, God let us do the things we chose to do.

And He let us deal with the consequences.

When Ginny and I were talking about such stuff yesterday, she asked if Jellyhead is a mother. "Then," Ginny said, " She'll understand about teaching them to walk. Sometimes, you have to let them fall so they can learn to stand".

She also compared God's treatment of us with a father who teaches his 16-year-old daughter to drive a car. He explains the rules of the road, the traffic laws, the safety tips – everything he can to protect her and keep her safe and help her get where she wants to go ...

But there comes a day when she turns the key and starts down the road alone.

The Father's heart is in his throat. He cringes when she shifts gears. He stays awake all night till she's safely home... But he lets her drive.

He lets her be responsible.



He lets her chose the road she drives on and the speed she goes.

He wants her to be free.

To cruise.

To get where she wants to go.

To come home safe.

But at that point he does not intervene.

How would she feel if he did?

And when she get a speeding ticket, does Dad intervene?

Sometimes.

Is he able to help? Of course. Hey, Dad can drive a stick-shift and back a trailer into the drive without running over the rose bushes. Besides, as all girls know, he's a soft touch made of money.

Is he willing to help?

Not necessarily.

Sometimes he'll say, "You got the ticket, you pay the fine".

Other times, he intervenes.

He pays the penalty for her.

It costs him.

"Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, *that he might bring us to God*, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit".

That's what St. Peter said in his first letter, the one that talks most about suffering, both that of Christ and that of people.

I think the phrase *that he might bring us to God* gives a reason for all suffering.

Yes, I know that most of our suffering, we cause ourselves — at least I think that most of my sufferings in life have been caused by me.

But there is a redemptive element in suffering.

Innocent suffering carries great power.

In one place Christ is referred to as the Lamb of God, slain before the foundation of the world.

Peter said, "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you as though some strange thing happened unto you: but rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's suffering ... If ye be



reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you...But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men's matters... Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf. For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God; and if it first begin with us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God?... Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls unto him in well doing as unto a faithful Creator”.

In another place, Peter talks about common afflictions “suffered by your brethren throughout the world”. Some bad things happen to us just because we live in a fallen world; such things are the common lot of mankind. No body's fault in particular just the way things are.

But the overall tone of Peter's thinking seems to be that at least some suffering links the afflicted person with Christ to bring somebody else to God.

In other words, sometimes the suffering is for the benefit of the observer.

Once Jesus healed a man who had been born blind.

The disciples asked, “Master, who did sin, this man or his parents that he was born blind”?

Jesus said, “Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents; but that the works of God should be made manifest in him”.

That the works of God should be made manifest to those who observe his deformity.

I have this fantasy.

I could not prove it by Scripture or even common sense, but I have this fantasy:

In my fantasy babies waiting to be born stand in a line before the throne and God asks for volunteers. God explains that on earth there are parents, doctors, nurses, brothers, sisters – people who will be nudged toward the Kingdom by being exposed to a suffering, cripple child, a child in pain, and God asks, “Who will go for me”? And some kids step forward saying, “I love those people I see down there. If it will help bring them Home to You, I'll go. I'll be born that way”.

That's just a fantasy but it rings true to me.

Suffering is rooted in love.

“Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, *that he might bring us to God*”.



This post is getting awfully long and I know my thoughts don't really answer the questions but I hope they help.

Sunday, November 17, 2013
Tits & Tobacco: a look back

*I'm going camping. So I won't be posting diary entries for the next few days. However, here I'm reposting one of my favorites from page 126 of my book *A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad*, I originally wrote this on **July 30, 2005**.*

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

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

Scrumptious.

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

Anyhow, this Mexican place sits right next to a Hooters Restaurant which also has an open air section. The two places blend together, so while we dined, I watched a fascinating jiggle show as sweet young things bent over vigorously polishing tables .

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

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

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

Stunned, I stood up at the table and prayed aloud saying something or another in thanks for food, jobs and beauty. Then the feasting began.



I've heard it said that a Christian needs to be ready to preach, pray or die at a moment's notice -- but this really caught me off guard.

I have no idea what I said, but afterwards several people commented about how appropriate the prayer was.

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

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

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

I gave the man a bit of change and he pressed for more till I said that was all I'm willing to give. I suspect the cell phone was only a prop for his scam; panhandling is illegal on the Riverwalk and there is a strong police presence.

So much for that.

Now here's where things get weird:

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

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

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

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

He started crying.

He stepped close and threw his arms around me and lay his head on my shoulder and cried his heart out. I have a great aversion to being touched;



it's so strong in me that I cut my own hair rather than let a barber touch me. And here this stranger is embracing me and crying. I deliberately shelved my aversion, steeled myself to being touched, and put my arms around him. I cradled him in my arms. I patted his back and rocked him back and forth like a child.

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

I said this over and over.

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

Now, here's what's odd.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Or, maybe I was not "used by God" Maybe I just ran into an emotional AIDS patient. Maybe the man is a kook who does this with everybody? Or, was this some kind of scam? Cynical Christian that I am, after embracing, cradling, and rocking this guy, I immediately checked to see my wallet was still in place – it was.

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

Was I on Candid Camera or something? Puzzling.



Monday, November 25, 2013
The Mystery Woman In The Woods

I met a woman on a trail deep in the woods.

In each hand she carried a can of DelMonte Green Beans.

Miles from anywhere, no camp or picnic area around, just wilderness. And she wore no backpack, no canteen, no camera, no binoculars—just a can of green beans in each hand.

This happened on a nature trail last Monday as I spent my week alone in a cabin at a Florida park at the confluence of the Withlacoochee and Suwannee Rivers. Here's a photo I snapped of such a trail:



Had she lived, Ginny and I would have observed our 45th Anniversary last week and our custom was to rent a cabin and celebrate time together.



Being without her, I chose to continue our tradition alone and spend time remembering her, reading a bit of Bible and a couple of books my doctor recommended, and thinking about Life, death and the mystery of God.

I like He-Man roughing it in the spirit of my Florida Cracker pioneer ancestors. Here's a photo of my cabin's porch:



I also hiked around Suwannee Spring, a place filled with happy memories of ago times where Gin and I once fell asleep on a sandbar while our children swam with local kids diving from rock outcrops high above the sulphur spring.

Monday I lingered there remembering one of the happiest days of our marriage. Here's a photo of our sandbar: Notice the layer of limestone rocks across the Suwannee. Once my eldest daughter, Jennifer, and I swam across and looked for fossils in that bank; and my youngest daughter, Patricia, and I swam through a scary narrow underwater tunnel (I was slimmer in those days; now, I'd get stuck and drown).



Last week, aided by my aluminum walker, I hiked nature trails, watched birds, and (Kids, don't read this paragraph, Dad's crazy) I did some minor rock-climbing to get this next photo of the spring's outflow into the Suwannee:





I visited a Confederate earthwork fort which defended the railroad bridge from invaders; and I viewed hand-hewed hull planks and iron remnants of an old-timey riverboat:





And I thought about the mystery of life, death, God, and the woman carrying those cans of green beans through the forest.

What was that about?

When she saw me on the trail, she acted skiddish. *Who is this stranger man hobbling along on a walking frame?* She saddled to the edge of the path. My curiosity wanted to ask her why she carried two cans of green beans in the middle of the woods, but I thought my speaking might spook her—she looked nervous as an old maid school marm—so I nodded, said a soft “Good morning, Mam”, and passed on my way... wondering,

What a mystery.



Speaking of mysteries, one morning I drove into the town of Live Oak for breakfast at the Dixie Grill where I overheard two portly peanut farmers deep in a serious discussion about where to buy size 56 bib-overalls. (They decided in favor of Amazon.Com).

At another table sat Uncle Lem who was apparently visiting his sister and her husband; they talked about niece Ellen who, For Heaven's Sake, had up and gone to live in California.

Being a man of action, Uncle Lem whipped out his cell phone and called Ellen right then and there. He talked with Baby Girl, so did Mama and Papa before they realized that the time is four hours earlier in California than in Florida.

When they hung up, Lem said, "When did she start talking about Jesus and God and all that religion stuff"?

Papa said, "I reckon she got saved out there".

His face reflecting his disbelief, Uncle Lem exclaimed, "In California! How can anybody get saved in California!"

Yes indeed, that is a mystery.

Back in my rustic cabin...





Yes, back in my rustic pioneer cabin, I rocked or swung in the porch swing and pondered the mysteries of God, His love, His commandments, and my own soul....No conclusions. Only questions.



How can I obey even that first command, the one to love the Lord with all my heart and mind and strength and being?

I can fear Him. He's bigger than me. He'd split the seat out of size 56 bibs.

I can respect Him. He created these waters and rocks and wonders all around me.

But Love? That, I'm not sure about.

He loves me, the Bible says, but I'm not always sure how I feel about Him. As Saint Paul told Timothy, "Without controversy, great indeed is the mystery of godliness".

All I need to know is that for reasons of His own, God loves me; and that Christ died for the ungodly.



I don't need to solve mystery. I can't fathom God's doings any more than I can know the thoughts of fish in the river. Or how anyone can get saved in California.... or why that woman carried two cans of green beans through the forest.



Wednesday, November 27, 2013
My Daily Thank You List

During our counseling session on November 1st, Hospice Grief Counselor Katie McConnelly asked me to list at least one current thing I am thankful for each day of the month. This exercise is to move me out of the past into the present.

I think this echoes Saint Paul's words in Philippians 4:8, "Fix your thoughts on what is true and good and right. Think about things that are pure and lovely, and dwell on the fine, good things in others. Think about all you can praise God for and be glad about".

OK. So here goes:

Friday, November 1, 2013

Lord, today I thank You for the light and warmth of last night's bonfire while I was sitting outside with Brandon, Jennifer, Terry, and Sherri in the cool night air.

**Saturday, November 2, 2013**

Lord, today I thank You for the greasy smoked sausage dog with onions and peppers at the flea market. First one I've had in ages. It was delicious! Also, I enjoyed seeing my three sons and Helen working together in harmony organizing the feed the poor breakfast project at Christ Church, thank You for them and their compassionate hearts.

Sunday, November 3, 2013

Lord, today I thank You that the Bagels & Bananas project came off without a hitch this morning, and for the beautiful sunrise (although I missed the solar eclipse), and for the hymn *All Creatures Of Our God And King* played at worship this morning—my favorite hymn; I complimented the pianist after the service.

Monday, November 4, 2013

Lord, today I thank You for the pleasant breakfast and six-hour-long conversation about You with my friends Judge M and Wes.

Tuesday, November 5, 2013

Lord, today I thank You that I was able to install new aquarium before the fish were traumatized too much; and that Fred & John set all the clocks in the house and changed burnt-out light bulbs that I can't reach.

Wednesday, November 6, 2013

Lord, today I thank You that replacing the car's headlight proved so easy and inexpensive, and that activating my credit card went without a hassle.

Thursday, November 7, 2013

Lord, today I thank You for a peaceful day's reading.

Friday, November 8, 2013

Lord, today I thank You for Eve's visit and that she treated me to breakfast and took over my blog posting for today. I just did not feel up to doing it. Also, thanks that my Food Stamp application was approved which should give me \$113 monthly income.

Saturday, November 9, 2013

Lord, today I thank You for my being able to find four old Jacksonville photos, including that 1944 picture of NAS-JAX, at that yard sale. And for my having a nice afternoon with the guys at Donald's home.



Sunday, November 10, 2013

Lord, today I thank You for being able to have a long talk with D.... about her husband's recent death; she needed to vent about the awfulness of the situation.

Monday, November 11, 2013

Lord, today I thank You for being able, finally, to finish reading Miguel de Molinos' *Spiritual Guide Which Disentangles The Soul*. Understood maybe an eighth of it but that part proved helpful.

Tuesday, November 12, 2013

Lord, I thank You that, had she lived, Ginny and I would have been married 45 years today. I plan, D.V., to spend the morning at her graveside remembering and being thankful that she was part of my life and I part of hers.

Wednesday, November 13, 2013

Lord, today I thank You for the news from Maryland and the possible repercussions for me.

Thursday, November 14, 2013

Lord, today I thank You that I was able to finally finished reading all 1,078 pages of that book of English ghost stories.

Friday, November 15, 2013

Lord, today I thank You for my new friend Mark.

Saturday, November 16, 2013

Thank You, Lord, for prospects of my retreat into the woods!

Sunday, November 17, 2013

Thank You, Lord for an uneventful trip, safe arrival at the park.

Monday, November 18, 2013

Last night I think I heard a horny stag bellow out in the swamp; Thank You Lord for the peace of this place. Thank You for the sound of rain on the tin roof as I rock and read and doze all day.

Tuesday, November 19, 2013

Thank Your Lord for the beauty of dawn on the Suwannee and the mist rising from the water at the spring. Thank You for the happy memories of the sandbar and for the sight of that woman with the green beans in the woods—what was that all about?

**Wednesday, November 20, 2013**

Thank You, Lord for giving me the ability to walk nature trails without too much pain. Please bless that couple from Orlando.

Thursday, November 21, 2013

Thank You Lord for that beautiful and delicate girl I saw in Dixie Grill, for the talkative helpful lady at the museum, and for the beautiful scenery I saw driving back roads.

Friday, November 22, 2013

Thank You Lord for an uneventful trip back home, for the nice visit to Ginny's grave, and that I missed the massive police raid down the block while I was out of town.

Saturday, November 23, 2013

Thank You for John and Pat's ministry in leading the Holiday Grief seminar at church; there is so much pain in so many people. I feel lucky that Gin's death has been so easy on me. I miss her, but we got off lightly compared to some others. Apparently, because we lived daily on such good terms for so long, we were able to part on such good terms. God help the poor bastards!

Sunday, November 24, 2013

Thank you Lord for the feed the poor thing going smoothly; for the fun I had at the Blood Mobile and with Gail at church; and for the success of Helen's art show, and for the fun lunch with Fred and John. And thank You for my new goldfish; they're beautiful.

Monday, November 25, 2013

Breakfast and visits with Wes, Fred, Donald, John, Sid, Jennifer, and Rex—Thank You Lord for surrounding me with such good people and so much love. Thank You for my being able to pay bills and for the royalty check from third quarter book sales

Tuesday, November 26, 2013

Thank You Lord for the beer and pizza treat with Helen and Donald, for my new goldfish and Christmas tree, and that things went easy at the bank. Forgive me for getting pissed at that lady... Do I really have to go back and apologize to her? I know the answer to that.



Thursday, December 5, 2013
Light Shining In The Dark



Facing this first holiday season without Ginny darkens my mood. But I'm catching small glimpses of light.

In a holiday grief seminar recently they suggested that those of us who suffered loss evaluate which traditions we'd like to continue and which we may temper or adjust to present needs.

For instance when Ginny and I married 45 years ago I was driving an 18-wheeler over the road. In each state, we collected small figures to remind us of that place and we decorated our Christmas trees over the years with these ornaments—each one we unpacked reminded us of happy places and people and funny or odd things we experienced together.

I could not face doing that this year.

Her death remains too fresh for me to handle those trinket-generated memories (But such memories do still well up continually). So I bought a pre-lit artificial tree and decorated it with plain silver balls. It's a bright happy thing with no memories associated with it.

On the other hand, in keeping with happy tradition, I attended Jacksonville's annual Christmas Boat Parade. My youngest daughter Patricia and her boyfriend Rob invited me to dinner on the St. Johns, the



river which bisects the city, and to watch more than 70 boats decorated as parade floats cruise along several miles of Riverwalk packed with virtually the whole population of the city cheering the lights and music and spirit of the night.

Here's a photo of Rob and Patricia at the parade:



Boat owners and organizations outlay hours of labor to decorate their craft. Some outline the boat's contours with lights; others arrange displays ranging from Nativity scenes to dolphins, birds, or a giant moving octopus.





All this commemorates the coming of Light into the world, Christ driving away darkness by being Light.

I'm afraid I'm not too hip on light of any kind right this moment, but just knowing that it is there comforts me.





Tuesday, December 10, 2013
Roller Coaster Ride

When it comes to grief, I'd prefer the gentle ups and downs of a merry-go-round pony,

Instead, since Ginny died I live on a roller coaster.

My feelings, attitudes, and actions fluctuate wildly between highs and lows with few level sections of track. One minute I cope, the next minute I despair. I laugh over happy memories with Ginny re-lived in my mind; then some thought, aroma, sound, sight triggers profound sadness, regret, or guilt.

The Christmas season intensifies these ups and downs.

As a honeymoon gift 45 years ago, I bought Ginny a manger scene which she set out every year. Because the delicate figures are so fragile and I'm so clumsy, I never touched these figurines. Only Ginny unwrapped them from protective bubble-wrap and arranged the display.



This morning for the first time in 45 years, I unpacked shepherds, wise men, angels, star, Jesus, Joseph, and Mary. I also arranged the cows, sheep, donkey, camels, butterflies, lambs, and raccoons—yes, over the years we supplemented the traditional figures.

I feared handling the little statues.



Ginny had maintained them all unbroken for all these years.

I remember how pleased and beautiful she always looked as she went about this task.

Also, this year I decided not to hang my own favorite Christmas decoration on our bedroom door like last year:



At the moment, I'm not sure if this were an up or down on my roller coaster.

I remain unsure about so many things.

Folks tell me I'm coping well.

If so, then, God help the poor bastards who aren't!

I cashed some savings bonds last week so I could pay car, health and house insurance premiums all due this month.

Ginny, an accountant, always handled such things and I walk on eggs about spending a cent for fear I'll screw things up big time. Every time I turn around something crops up that I want to talk over with her.



But she's not there.

I think this manifests what grief counselors call “secondary loss”. The beloved's death is the primary loss, but I also lose my identity as husband, lover, caregiver. And I lose her companionship, friendship, sex, advice, common sense, and skill as a homemaker and a host of other things which crop up unexpectedly every day.

I don't know if it's a secondary loss or just plain laziness, but I've lost motivation to do anything. I don't care if dishes pile up in the sink. Or if the leaves get raked, or if I post a diary entry, or eat—ramin noodles have become my favorite dish. And I've lost desire to work on book projects that used to be important to me. Who cares if they get done or not?

This week the idea haunts me that I may have killed Ginny through some neglect or mistake I made in my caring for her during her illness.

I search the detailed daily medical journal I kept recording every meal, every pill (at one point she had to take 13 a day, all at different time intervals), every injection, every dose, every bowel movement, every time I lifted her, every visitor, every instruction from Hospice staff—I find no fault in how I tended her. Nevertheless, the worry nags that I should have done something different. Did I give her too much of this, or not enough of that? Did I truly look to her best interest or merely do what was convenient for myself?

I think I did right, but there's a chance I didn't. And that idea haunts me.

Recently I've drifted into looking at more internet pornography. I tell myself that I'm searching for some woman who reminds me of Ginny in shape or attitude or smile.

My lassitude carries over into gift-giving. I have a hard time thinking of anything I want to give to anybody.

When I took over the checkbook, I discovered that Ginny supported a number of charities that I'd known nothing about. (One hospital notified me that she'd been a regular supporter since 1992!) She divided her giving between charities which help people and those which protect the environment. Now that I write the checks, I find that I don't care about saving whales, puppies, wolves, or trees. And when it comes to starving children—screw 'em.

Now this roller coaster ride gets funny here because while appeals from charities feeding starving people in distant lands leave me cold, yet when I'm confronted by a real live human being in need, my heart goes out. At



a meeting last Saturday, a coping with grief for the holidays seminar, I encountered a person in worse shape than I am.

My heart melted and I went out of my way to offer physical and emotional comfort. What was that all about?

I've put distant charities on the back burner for now, but I've not totally Scrouged out—not yet anyhow.

Because my family suffers five birthdays between now and January as well as Midnight Candlelight Service, Christmas, New Year, Luminary Night, Epiphany, and an anniversary or two—I've had to cut back on activities. I can't face five birthday parties and all that extra stuff. I plan, God willing, to attend two activities only, but even that plan is flexible—depends on where my roller coaster is at the given moment.

Now, here's another funny—funny odd, not funny ha-ha—thing: I am a Christian and I draw a modicum of comfort from confidence in the character of Christ.

Saint Paul told believers in Thessaloniki, “I want you to know what happens to a Christian when he dies so that when it happens, you will not be full of sorrow, as those are who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and then came back to life again, we can also believe that when Jesus returns, God will bring back with him all the Christians who have died”.

Yet, my grief roller coaster lacks seat belts.

No safety bar locks me in.

I have nothing to hold on to but Jesus—nevertheless, when this thing drops, my heart drops and my stomach rises.

This ride is no fun at all.



Tuesday, December 17, 2013
The Running Of The Santas



For years my wife collected Santa figures. When Ginny died, in her will, she passed scores of these toys on to our daughter Eve.

This week Eve placed some of Ginny's Santas on display at Jacksonville's Main Library. The placard reads:

Displayed in memory of Virginia Mae Cowart, the originator of this collection, who always treasured Christmas and Santa.



For one children's program, Eve dressed as Mrs. Santa to present Christmas stories to kids.



Now, many of Ginny's Santa toys move, act, or speak. One drives a race car; another strums a guitar; one marches in circles while beating a drum; one gyrates like Elvis; one climbs a ladder; one rings a bell, and another blows soap bubbles.

Some scoot around on a reindeer sheds.

All of them play loud tinny Christmas carols.

As a conclusion to Eve's program, she staged a "Running of the Santas"--she set them all in action at once. Kids screamed with delight at the cacophony of singing, whistles, carols, bubbles, bells, and Ho Ho Hos.

Gin would have loved this!

What a fitting memorial.



Saturday, December 21, 2013
Tripwires of Christmas

For those of us in grief tripwire entanglements lace the minefield of the holidays.

These invisible emotional triggers snare us at unexpected moments.

For instance, last Sunday a woman at church shocked me.

As the worship service began and I was looking at the choir processional, out of the corner of my eye I glimpsed a flash of a red Christmas-print sleeve as this woman came in late. Immediately, I thought, *Why is Ginny getting here late? She's never late for anything.*



Then I realized that this was not Ginny arriving in church.

It was some stranger.

Thing is, this unknown woman wore a red Christmas blouse like one of Ginny's favorites. I looked closer and realized the pattern was different, just similar to Ginny's.

These thoughts flashed in an instant and stunned me. I felt her loss all afresh at a mere glimpse of a red sleeve.

Ginny will never arrive late for anything. Next time I see her will be when Christ returns with all those who have already died in faith. That will happen in the fullness of time and it won't be late.

But that will be then, I still live in the now.

And sometimes now is a bitch.

And any little thing around Christmas can renew my sense of loss.

Or sometimes, my sense of joy.

God, but I miss Ginny.

My friend Mark said, "We live in a time between times, and we must take the sinful world as it is, not as we would have it be".

Christmas carols make another emotional tripwire for me because of Ginny's final coma. She remained alert till just two days before her death. But even in her final coma, I continued to hold her hand and talk to her all night.

I reminded her of what a good and happy life we've enjoyed together in spite of trials. I assured her that she had accomplished everything a love, wife, mother, helper, and Christian should accomplish in life. I talked to her about love and sex and birds, and vacations, and books and children and smoking by the canal (old private joke).

When I ran out of things to say, I sang love songs to her.

And when I forgot the words of love songs, I sang Christmas carols to her pale, unconscious body.... Same carols the radio plays constantly each day of this season.

God, but I miss her.

Christmas presents remind me of her on a practical level.

How in the Hell do you wrap these things?

Ginny crafted square corners and crisscrossed ribbons and tied tidy bows. Sometimes she made the boxes look like houses in a Christmas village.



This year I bought 50 brown paper lunch bags for 99 cents at the grocery store. Stuck presents in, wrote a name on the bag in marker, dabbed a Christmas sticker on it, and stapled it shut. Merry Christmas from dad who has never folded a square corner in his life.

God, but I miss Ginny.

I could not deal with greeting cards this year; I plan to send out a blanket e-mail to everyone, attaching photos of Ginny taken in Christmases past.

Looking at these happy photos of her generates all sorts of joyous memories unrelated to Christmas at all. In every photo I see her as she either looked delighted, happy, enticing, or tired. I'll never fathom why this beautiful woman adored me, how she saw qualities that I can not see my self—but she did.

And I rejoice in her memory—but it's hard nonetheless.

Yesterday, another tripwire entangled me—laundry.

You wouldn't think a guy could get emotional over laundry.

But I did.

I can wash clothes.

I can dry clothes.

But then I face the clothes hangers.

C.S. Lewis opened his wardrobe and found the magic land of Narnia; I open my clothes closet and ...

when I was in army basic training, we infiltrated a mock enemy machine gun nest on our bellies through an obstacle course minefield laced with razor wire, trip wires, live ammunition wizzing over head, exploding shells, star flares, mud, belly-crawling... like any typical bedroom closet with hangers.

As I tried to hang up my laundry (a task Ginny could accomplish in minutes) six or eight or ten hangers attacked me. They hooked each other. They hooked the bed rails. They hooked my shoelaces. Then hooked my zipper. My belt buckle. My shirtcollar.

They worked their way up, going for my jugular.

Hangers hunt in packs.

These things tried to bring me down to ground level and kill me. I thought I was a goner.

Where is Ginny now?

Ginny had the damn things tamed. They'd eat out of her hand. And purr.



God, but I miss her.

So, as a Christian, what comfort is my faith in this minefield of grief?

Not a whole hell of a lot.

Oh, my core beliefs about Christ remain the same. He is who He said He is; and He did what He said He would do. Truth is truth whether it comforts or not. But my own expectations about facing Ginny's death with Christian confidence fail me.

Alas, you can't be disillusioned unless you were working under an illusion in the first place.

I think I swallowed a line about death not having a sting—damn thing totes an electric cattle prod! And it jabs every time I turn around. Sleeves on red sweaters, carols, presents, even coat hangers jab me in the heart.

I wonder if Saint Paul understood where I am?

He told the people at Corinth, “We felt we were doomed to die and saw how powerless we were to help ourselves; but that was good, for then we put everything into the hands of God, who alone could save us, for He can even raise the dead”.

The Prophet called the risen Lord Jesus “A Man of Sorrows, Acquainted With Grief”.

In a calm undercurrent to my own grief and to all the triggers and tripwires and emotional explosions around me daily this Christmas, I sometimes think I hear this Man of Sorrows whisper, *Yes, John, this is a bitch. Your pain is real. Your confusion is pitiful. But you are going to make it. I'll help you. This too shall pass. We're in this together.*

And I can only respond, “Lord, be merciful to John Cowart, a hurt, wounded, entangled, miserable sinner”.

Here's a photo of Ginny delighted in her new Christmas sweater last year:



Wednesday, December 25, 2013
Joy In God's Gift Card

Perhaps it's a good thing Ginny died of cancer eight months ago this week; otherwise, she might have died of embarrassment over the antics of her husband and family last night at the midnight candlelight service.



I imagine Ginny standing next to Jesus in Heaven looking down on us, shaking her head, saying, “Lord, I tired my best to civilize that brood”.

Whereupon Jesus would shake His head and say, “I know, Ginny. I know. I've tried for years too”.

Eve's husband and Donald's wife did not attend the midnight service, so the three of us Cowarts sat on the back row of church without adult supervision.

For the solemn occasion this year, I wore a Canadian maple-leaf bolo-tie (haven't seen anyone wearing one of those since 1970 but I found mine in Ginny's sock drawer). Eve wore a diamond lapel pin spelling out JOY and a huge white and pink Hello Kitty hat. She and Donald snatched it back and forth and took turns wearing it.

I mention my clothes because I remember one time when Eve was a pre-teen, she took me to a midnight candlelight service at one of Jacksonville's high-society churches while I was dressed in torn rags and covered in pine sap crusted with black soot from a house fire (not our house, someone-else's—long story).

My wise daughter then said, “Dad, if those clothes are good enough to serve God in all day, they're good enough to worship Him tonight”.

I've never forgotten that.

Last night, the pastor, the reverend Mark Eldridge, compared God's offer of salvation and forgiveness of our sin to a gift card.

“It is by grace you have been saved through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God” he quoted.

Raised hands in the congregation showed that many of us have given or received gift cards this Christmas.

At one point in his sermon, the pastor referred to the Scripture where Jesus said, “Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him”!

That broke up the three Cowarts on the back row because once 30 years ago when the kids were little, I cooked supper.

I filled a big cast iron pot with water, sprinkled in bullion and sage so it smelled wonderful boiling, then added six mossy rocks and a rubber snake.

Once everyone gathered at the table, and we gave thanks, I lifted the lid and a cloud of aromatic steam arose to reveal our meal.



Then I cited the Scripture about God giving good gifts while my family roared with laughter—then we all walked to a favorite restaurant for our real supper.

So, when the pastor cited that same Scripture, my now-grown kids remembered that meal Dad had prepared and laughed out loud in the church service.

For some reason Ginny hardly ever let me cook.

Anyhow, the pastor said that we trust a gift card's value because we trust the character of the one giving it to us. God's gift represents God's character. And, if we fathers, being evil, know how to give good gifts... How much more...?

The thing about gift cards is that they are valuable only if you cash them in.

I can scorn God's gift in a huff because I wanted a pony or a new MP-3 Player .

I can stick God's gift card in my billfold meaning to cash it in someday and walk around with it for years while it does me no good.

I can stick it in a dresser drawer and ignore it there.

Or, I can cash it in and receive the benefits of salvation.

God's gift card to us comes pre-paid.

Donald read the Epistle during the service; it said, "For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ; Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us..."

Christ does not offer us a cheap gift.

Salvation is like an unlimited pre-paid gift card from Tiffinay's!

It cost the Giver His life-blood; it cost's us nothing.

It is the gift of God

Invaluable!

Unless, of course, I choose not to cash it in.

In that case, I snub the Giver and scorn the gift as of no value.

No reason for me to be grateful.



Custom in our congregation dictates that the Bible readers serve as cup-bearers during the communion portion of the service. So Donald, having read Titus, ministered the wine after the pastor served each communicant the broken bread...

That is, Donald administered wine to the worshipers in line ahead of me. But when my turn came, my son drew back the cup and said in his best imitation Seinfeld-Nazi voice, “NO soup for you”!

I cracked up laughing so hard I could not move.

Later, the pastor said, “I wondered what was holding up the line”?

And up in Heaven, Ginny shook her head and covered her eyes, and Jesus said, “At least you taught them how to really enjoy Christmas”.

After the service, Eve, Donald and I stayed long in the dark church parking lot, hanging out after everyone else had left. No reason. We just enjoyed eachother's company in joy.

Donald said, “This was such fun. Let's do it again next year”.

Thus silently, how silently, the Wondrous Gift is given as God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His Heaven.

Thanks be to God for His invaluable Gift.

Joy to the world!

Ginny in my arms showing off her new red socks— Christmas, 2004





Thursday, January 30, 2014
Grief—With A Cherry On Top

Even with Ginny being dead for nine months now, unexpected surges of grief still prod me with a devastating sense of having lost her.

The present permanency of her death still startles me just when I think I'm adjusting and "coming out of it" ..

At those times, being a Christian who believes in the Resurrection of the dead in Christ and the life of the world to come doesn't help one bit.

One of grief's surprising reminders hit me a few weeks ago and it still troubles me because, of all things, a cherry triggered the pain.

I'd driven across town running errands and stopped for lunch at a fast food place in Roosevelt Square near the Publix grocery store where Ginny often shopped.

I waited in line at the counter and, without thinking, ordered my usual fare whenever we'd stopped there—chicken nuggets, cold slaw, and a strawberry milk shake.

The counter girl carried my tray for me through the noonday crowd to a table and sat it in place.

This restaurant serves milkshakes topped with with whipped cream and a cherry.

Pink strawberry confection layered with white cream and a long-stemmed bright red cherry.

Because of her diabetes, Ginny could not drink milkshakes; she always ordered a diet drink to temper her blood sugar readings.

For as long as I can remember, whenever I ordered my own milkshake, I always would pick the cherry up by the stem and reach it across the table for Ginny to bite the cherry off—just a little love-ritual we always did.

So this day also I picked the cherry up by the stem and reached it across the table...

And abruptly realized that Ginny was not there.

Never will be again.

Like a fool I sat there in the crowded restaurant with my arm extended holding out a cherry in midair.

To emptiness.

I started crying.

Then I drew back my arm and ate the cherry myself.



Ginny and John were in love and married for 45 years when she died.

The pages of John's 2013 Diary tell a love story and give a real-time look at Christian grief.

The Diary starts in a sex clinic and ends in a joyous Christmas Eve candlelight service; in between there is courage, love, and humor.





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