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Reflections . . .

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ORDINARY GRACE

by Bob Lively

As the slick tires of the pickup I drive negotiated the ruts that join the pavement to the driveway of Down Home Ranch, I glanced at my watch as I wondered how much time I could afford to commit to this latest obligation. Some years before, I had enjoyed a brief conversation with Dr. Jerry Horton, the ranch's director. In that brief hour he wove one detail after another into a tale regarding his conversion to the faith. Before I offered a goodbye, I shook Jerry's hand and promised to broadcast the story of Down Home Ranch to the world through my newspaper column.

An upheaval in my personal life interfered with my best-laid plans to do just that, or, at least, that is how I rationalized my procrastination. I did begin a new job, and every time I recalled my pledge to Jerry, I winced some following the prick that appropriate guilt delivers to one's conscience. I consistently ran from the truth by distracting myself with projects.

Months rolled all too quickly, it seems, into three very pleasant years, and one morning, when my thoughts danced high above any real desire on my part to face my dishonesty, I received a letter in the mail from, you guessed it, Down Home Ranch. It was not even a personal letter, but it was rather a formal appeal for support stuffed with information regarding the ranch's growing ministry. Two immediate thoughts vied for attention in my mind: One, I was glad to see that they were making it, even in the wake of my broken promise. (I readily admit to the implied grandiosity inherent in such a notion. Please regard such as nothing more than one more bit of evidence regarding my rampant narcissism.) And two, I knew that I would never make spiritual progress unless I dedicated myself to the discipline of keeping my word.

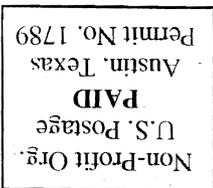
It was, of course, this latter awareness that drove me to pick up the phone to call Jerry and Judy Horton with the request that I might fulfill a promise made three years before. Not surprisingly, they demonstrated the kind of grace that I've witnessed countless times before in ordinary human beings who have allowed God to shape them toward extraordinary humility through the discipline of prayer. I asked for a second chance. They complied.

So, I rolled through the gate of Down Home Ranch on that warm November afternoon rife with the hope for full absolution, but I was not at all prepared for what I was to discover. Judy and Jerry shared their dream in a trailer they have dubbed "The Mustard Seed." They showed me scrapbooks filled with photographs of the children participating in the summer ranch camp activities, and later they even introduced me to a pot-bellied pig named Francine, whom the summer before had been elected by the campers as the official mayor of Down Home Ranch.

As I leaned over a fence to rub the neck of Blossom, the ranch's pet donkey, a miniature horse, whose moniker I've forgotten, slipped up behind me and bit my butt. The pain was sharp, but before I could charge the beast with any complaint, I recognized that I deserved such a welcome.

Before I could return to my pickup, the school bus arrived at the front gate, stopped, and whooshed open its yellow door with an audible sigh. And in autumn's dying light I witnessed the Kingdom again, as I have so many times before: A young girl stepped from the bus. Her mother drove

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the family car the several hundred yards separating the yard from the gate and greeted her daughter with a smile I could discern even a football field away. Moments later I was introduced to Jerry and Judy's daughter, who is retarded, and whose obvious affection for both of her parents told me, without the necessity of words, that this kid could teach me a great deal about what it means to love.

Driving away, feckless drops of rain splashed against the windshield. I paused before turning on to the highway as I traced the route of one particular drop upon the glass. It flowed slowly out of view and disappeared into that mysterious cycle where, in time, it will again form a cloud that will cause more rain to fall so that a tiny mustard seed might give rise to promise and bring texture to hope. It was then that I realized that once more I had been baptized, just as I had been in a holy moment in the earliest months of my life. Grace, it seems, shows up every time we encounter the Kingdom of God. And I can think of nowhere on earth where such happens more often than at Down Home Ranch, even though the place *is* home to one ornery little horse who is known to carry a grudge.

Dr. Robert D. Lively is Teacher in Residence at Riverbend Church. Bob is a friend, teacher and supporter of Down Home Ranch. His column in the *Austin American Statesman* can be found every other Saturday. Yo Yo, the tiny horse in his story, still resides happily at Down Home Ranch.

Down Home Ranch seeks to be faithful to the Christian mission to provide for those in need. The mission of Down Home Ranch is to build a rural, self-reliant community for adults with disabilities such as mental retardation, offering training, housing, recreation and dignified employment, as well as opportunities for growth in mind, body and spirit.