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Editor: Pr. Richard O. Johnson
<roj@nccn.net>

Associate Editor: Pr. Peter Speckhard
<pspeckhard@hotmail.com>

Member: Associated Church Press.

EDITORIAL OFFICE: P. O. Box 1394,
Grass Valley, CA 95945. <roj@nccn.net>

SUBSCRIPTION OFFICE: American
Lutheran Publicity Bureau, P. O. Box 327,
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Sweetness of melody with doctrine



“All Scripture is inspired by God for our benefit; it was composed by the Spirit for this reason, that . . . [each might] select a remedy for his particular malady. . . . Now the Prophets teach certain things, the Historians and the Law teach others, and Proverbs provides still a different sort of advice, but the Book of Psalms encompasses the benefit of them all. It foretells what is to come and memorializes history; it legislates for life, gives advice on practical matters, and serves in general as a repository of good teachings, carefully searching out what is suitable for each individual. What did the Holy Spirit do when he saw that the human race was not led easily to virtue, and that due to our penchant for pleasure we gave little heed to an upright life? He mixed sweetness of melody with doctrine so that inadvertently we would absorb the benefit of the words through gentleness and ease of hearing, just as clever physicians frequently smear the cup with honey when giving the fastidious some rather bitter medicine to drink. . . . A Psalm is tranquility of soul and the arbitration of peace; it settles one’s tumultuous and seething thoughts. It mollifies the soul’s wrath and chastens its recalcitrance.” – Basil the Great, *Homilies on the Psalms*; trans. in James McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 1987).

Déjà vu all over again



The ELCA News Service’s press release about the forthcoming Churchwide Assembly engaged in an interesting bit of spin when it listed the items which will be on the agenda in August. First, it noted, there will be an election for ELCA vice president. Then the assembly will be considering a proposed full communion agreement with the United Methodist Church. Oh, and then, by the way, there’s that vote on a proposed social statement on human sexuality, and accompanying recommendations about ministry standards. Why, one could almost believe there are other things more important than sex!

Wishful thinking, of course. When I no longer could put off writing this article, I pulled out *Forum Letter*’s pre-assembly coverage of the past few biennial gatherings. It was astonishing that what we wrote in 2005 could, with a few changes in nomenclature, be rerun pretty much verbatim as we head into this August’s conclave. Back then we noted that there was really only one issue (plus a few sidebars) that would be of much importance. The issue hasn’t changed (and for that matter, the sidebars haven’t changed much either). Predictions of parliamentary wrangling about majority versus two-thirds votes, speculation about

what might happen to the ELCA if this recommendation passes or doesn't pass, talk of how different groups characterize different proposals as "moderate" or "radical" — it's all there, four years ago. The more things change, the more things stay the same.

Elections and ecumenism

The sidebars, to take care of them first, have to do with elections and ecumenism. Vice President Carlos Peña's term is expiring. He is eligible for another term and has indicated his willingness to serve again. Peña has been popular around the church, a likeable, winsome and eloquent spokesman for the ELCA, and I wouldn't be surprised if he were re-elected on the first ballot.

The ecumenical proposal is for full communion with the United Methodist Church, a relationship approved by the UMC last year. This will not get the attention it deserves, but will be approved overwhelmingly and enthusiastically. There are pockets of people who find it unfathomable that we could approve such an agreement with a church whose doctrine of the Eucharist is as nebulous and undefined as that of the Methodists. There are others who wish we could revisit the whole concept of "full communion," which often seems, as it has developed, to have become an ecumenism of the least common denominator. But never mind; if we are already in full communion with the United Church of Christ and the Moravians, on what possible basis could we say "no" to the United Methodists?

Muddy tea leaves

And so once again, the biggest issue by far in August will be sex, and in particular it will be the church's view of homosexuality. As readers surely know by now, there are two matters before the Assembly. The first is a proposed social statement which, bottom line, says there's a great diversity of opinion within the ELCA, and we just can't say for sure what we think about homosexuality. The other is a series of recommendations which, if adopted, would open the way for — or even require — the ELCA to ordain persons who are in "publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous same-gender relationships."

What will actually happen, though, requires a better skill at reading tea leaves than I can claim.

The proposed social statement, we have argued in these pages, is poorly written, unreasonably verbose, and theologically vapid, and it doesn't teach much of anything about human sexuality (though a good bit about the ELCA). But that never stopped an assembly before, so who knows what they might do? A string of synod assemblies have endorsed the proposed statement (one wonders how many voting "yes" have actually read the thing) and ministry recommendations, and that is causing some discouragement among those who hope both might be defeated.

Poor predictors

Of course synod assembly votes aren't necessarily a good predictor of what might happen in Minneapolis. A vote in a synod assembly is an easy vote, with few consequences. Churchwide Assembly voting members are generally responsible people who love their church, and who may more easily be swayed by arguments that, whatever your personal view, the approval of this particular statement (and perhaps even more, the approval of the ministry recommendations) would be disastrous for the church.

Furthermore, a social statement requires a 2/3 vote to be approved. Past social statements have all passed rather handily. Even the abortion statement of 1991, arguably the most controversial to be approved to date, garnered more than 90% of the votes. For a variety of reasons (not all of them good), *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust* is likely to face far more solid opposition. It is "conventional wisdom," born out by plenty of assembly votes, that the church is fairly evenly divided on the question of homosexuality. If the Churchwide Assembly is also so divided, a 2/3 requirement is a tough one to meet.

But since no one really knows what will happen, let's imagine some scenarios. There are only a limited number of possibilities, so probably we'll get something right.

Scenario 1: Just say no

The "traditionalists" would like to see both the social statement and the ministry recommendations defeated. This is the position advocated by the signers of "An Open Letter to the Voting Members of the Churchwide Assembly" (though the letter doesn't make a clear distinction between the two

documents). The letter (which can be viewed at www.lutherancore.org/papers/open-ltr-2009.shtml) is signed by a collection of seminary professors, (mostly retired) bishops, and others – including James Crumley and David Preus, the last presiding bishops of the LCA and ALC respectively. (Full disclosure: the letter was also signed by myself and by Sarah Hinlicky Wilson, editor of our companion publication *Lutheran Forum*.)

If both the social statement and the recommendations should be defeated, it would behoove the Churchwide Assembly to adopt “Dissenting Position One,” proposed by three of the sexuality task force members. This proposal would maintain current ministerial standards and endorse the 1993 pastoral statement of the bishops which found no Scriptural basis for blessing same-sex relationships. Most important, it would call for a ten year moratorium on further proposals for change in the ELCA. Without that last provision, we could expect a continuing drumbeat of demands for change. Realistically, we could probably expect that anyway, since there are no teeth in such a proposed moratorium.

Scenario 2: Words, no action

It is quite conceivable that the Churchwide Assembly could approve the social statement, but then go on to reject the changes in ministry standards. The social statement, it could be argued, is an accurate reflection of where the ELCA currently is. “This church also acknowledges that consensus does not exist,” it admits, “concerning how to regard same gender committed relationships, even after many years of thoughtful, respectful, and faithful study and conversation.” There may be some, even many, voting members who will support the statement precisely because it admits we have no consensus – and who may then go on to reason that changes in ministry standards before there is consensus would be a formula for disaster.

Even if they find the social statement problematic, there are plenty of voting members who might be reluctant to vote against it. That nice task force worked for so many years; to say “no” at this point would be unkind.

And besides, some might see it as a handy and useful compromise. We approve the statement, acknowledge the division, and then go on to leave intact standards and rules which many bishops com-

pletely ignore already. The last Churchwide Assembly urged bishops and synods to “exercise restraint” and nobody’s died from it; why not keep on, for the time being, with the ambiguous *status quo*?

Scenario 3: Action, no words

It is also conceivable that the social statement could be refused, but the Assembly could go on to change the ministry standards. That seems counter-intuitive, but it is in some ways the most likely outcome. Changing the ministry standards only requires a majority, while the social statement demands a 2/3 vote. If indeed the Assembly is closely divided, this could easily happen.

Arguably the most likely outcome, but also perhaps the worst. It would change the ELCA’s ministry standards without providing any justification or context at all. The social statement, for all its faults, at least acknowledges the lack of consensus. Changing the ministry standards without that acknowledgement would leave the church as wholeheartedly accepting of homosexual practice as is the United Church of Christ or the Episcopal Church.

Indeed, there are some among the “revisionists” who would be perfectly happy to have the social statement go down to defeat, as long as the standards are changed. After all, the social statement does make some rather traditional comments about marriage, and it does not really bring the ELCA fully on board the “homosexuality is as morally acceptable as heterosexuality” bandwagon. This may be why “Appropriate Next Steps for the ELCA,” the statement of “teaching theologians” drafted by Ralph Klein and Barbara Rossing (www.OT-studies.com), doesn’t even mention the social statement in its enthusiastic support of the ministry recommendations.

Scenario 4: The full monty

This scenario, the full monty as it were, has been popular among voting members of synod assemblies. Like Scenario 3, it could strike some as a viable compromise: admit our disagreements, resolve to “journey together faithfully,” and then just accept what many see as inevitable anyway.

Such an approach has been gaining ground among some who are just sick of the conversation and turmoil. Observers at several synod assemblies reported a kind of weariness particularly among

“moderates,” an attitude of “let’s just get this over with.” Not the approach that might have been taken by, oh, Athanasius for example, but an understandable one nonetheless.

In truth, approving all the recommendations will not end the turmoil in the ELCA. The social statement still reflects some ambiguity about same-sex sexual behavior. The recommendations do not directly address the question of same-sex marriage, nor do they provide a mechanism for “regularizing” those ordained through the extraordinary candidacy process. If “the full monty” is accomplished, we can expect the next Churchwide Assembly, or the one after that, to be faced with these issues at least, and to hear the argument, “See, nothing terrible has happened. It’s time just to tell people whose ‘bound consciences’ lead them to oppose same-sex relationships to shape up or ship out. We don’t need to journey faithfully with them anymore.”

Scenario 5: Change the statement

Of course all of these possibilities assume that both the social statement and the ministry standards would be approved or defeated just as they are, and that is unlikely. What would happen, for instance, if, in the debate on the social statement, an effort were made to delete the section on “conscience-bound differences” and simply affirm homosexual relationships as God-pleasing? It could happen. As I read the rules of procedure, an amendment to the document would only require a majority vote (though I freely admit I could be wrong about this; I find the rules to be pretty unintelligible in places).

Or, less likely but still possible, what if the statement were amended to speak in terms like those of the 1970 LCA statement on *Sex, Marriage, and the Family*: that homosexuality “is viewed biblically as a departure from the heterosexual structure of creation.” Or what if someone moved to insert the words from the comparable 1980 ALC statement *Human Sexuality and Sexual Behavior*, that homosexuality is “contrary to God’s intent for his children”?

Such a direction would, of course, upset the balance the task force tried to strike. If the statement were amended in either direction, the result would likely be that the amended statement would go down to defeat. Yet the possibilities of change are almost endless, and that makes predicting the out-

come particularly precarious.

Scenario 6: These things shall be

There are some outcomes, however, that are almost guaranteed. This is not pleasant to contemplate, and in some quarters it is considered rude to bring these things up. “Fear mongering” is the accusation often made. But Churchwide Assembly voting members should be aware of some likely results if their actions are perceived as moving toward, or achieving, a new openness to homosexual practice.

First, congregations will leave. This is already happening — quietly, because synods seldom make public announcement or even acknowledgment of congregations that pull out. Pastors will understand this reluctance; local congregations typically don’t announce in church, “So-and-so has left our fellowship because they believe we’re unfaithful to Scripture.” It’s the same with bishops and synods.

But sometimes there is public attention paid. The buzz recently in the southwest is that Community Church of Joy in Glendale, AZ, long a leader (for better or for worse) in the “contemporary worship” and evangelism field, has withdrawn from the ELCA and joined Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ. A few other lesser-known congregations have done so as well, while others have moved to the Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod or to one of the more established “microsynods.” That stream is almost certain to increase if there is a clear change in the ELCA’s teachings and policies about sexuality after August.

Broken communion

What will get even less notice is the number of ethnic minority congregations, particularly Asian and Hispanic ministries, that will disappear. The pastor of a Chinese congregation recently called me, wondering what the options might be after August. This pastor had actually been invited by Bishop Hanson to preside at one of the Eucharist services at the assembly, but he declined the honor. “We are in reality no longer in communion with the ELCA,” he lamented. His will not be the only ethnic congregation that will feel they must leave.

A similar reaction will almost certainly take place within the global Lutheran community, and what we have seen happening in the Anglican communion will be replicated among the churches of the

Lutheran World Federation. Already leaders of some LWF churches have been in quiet conversation with officials of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, discussing the possibility of a new international organization that could become a home for those Lutherans, particularly in the global south, unwilling to “journey faithfully together” with an ELCA they believe has gone off the rails. This can only become extremely embarrassing to Mark Hanson, who currently serves as president of LWF as well as presiding bishop of the ELCA.

Ecumenical fallout

The ecumenical tremors, too, will be significant, though not likely as noticeable immediately. Some Roman Catholic ecumenists believe the future of Lutheran/Catholic dialogue is grim—at least insofar as the ELCA is the primary dialogue partner. As ironic as it seems, the future of Lutheran/Catholic dialogue may now actually lie with Missouri, which Rome increasingly regards as the more theologically serious Lutheran body.

Of course no one is going to say publicly that the ELCA is sliding into ecumenical irrelevance. Ecumenical politeness makes that impossible. And besides, look at the full communion partners the ELCA can boast! Never mind that those partners are all mainline American Protestant denominations in various stages of collapse or decline. (The United Methodist Church would be an exception, since they are structurally an international church—one reason they have been slower to fall victim to the agitation to change their stance toward homosexuality.)

Indianapolis convocation

Lutheran CORE, the coalition of several ELCA “reform groups” which has taken the lead in opposing the sexuality proposals, has scheduled a convocation at Christ the Savior Lutheran Church in Fishers, IN (a suburb of Indianapolis), September 25-26. The opening presentations and discussions will be on the theme “What after Minneapolis?” Those involved in Lutheran CORE are faithful clergy and laity who have no intention of leaving their church, and who are dedicated to reforming the ELCA from within. As long as there has been an issue to be presented and debated at the Churchwide Assembly, the reform movement has had a clear and specific goal. But if these proposals pass, what happens next? That, of course, is the question to be discussed in Indianapolis. (For registration information, go to www.lutherancore.org/.) Lutheran CORE leaders are in it for the long haul, and they have been developing “contingency plans” in the event that the ELCA adopts the sexuality proposals. Those plans have not yet been made public, but it is safe to assume that “journeying together” placidly is not one of the options.

— by Richard O. Johnson, editor

For daily news and commentary from the Minneapolis ELCA Churchwide Assembly by editor Richard O. Johnson, log on to Forum Online at <http://www.alpb.org> during the assembly, August 17-23. Forum Letter's regular coverage of the assembly will appear in our October issue.

Book review: *American Babylon*



American Babylon: Notes of a Christian Exile by Richard John Neuhaus (Basic Books, 2009).

Within five minutes of hearing that a controversial abortion doctor had been gunned down in the narthex of his ELCA church, I thought, “I wish Richard John Neuhaus were alive to write about this.” (Full disclosure: Neuhaus was my uncle.) Whenever something happened that was stranger than fiction, with all kinds of angles theological and

otherwise, you could count on Neuhaus to unravel it with wisdom and clarity, wit and charity, always placing it in the context of the presence of God in a church and world that God is always calling home. Alas, Father Neuhaus has gone home, which is fine for him but leaves us feeling bereft. But he did leave behind one last book, published posthumously, called *American Babylon*—fitting for a nation in which so many events and movements need precisely the clarity Neuhaus brought to the discussion.

Anyone who plans to read *American Babylon*

should first peruse the index of names at the back and then ask how in the world the author is going to refer to that eclectic group of people coherently in one little book. Poets and prophets, folk singers and philosophers, saints and scholars, presidents and people you've never heard of – it seems the book must either merely skim the surface of practically every topic under the sun or else be a microfiche version of several volumes on western civilization. But in just 251 very readable pages, Neuhaus serves as tour guide of the Babylon that is early 21st century America. "I belong," he admits, "and I write for those who belong; for those who accept, and accept with gratitude . . . their place in a world far short of the best of all possible worlds." Those who take the tour see disparate topics fitting together to show where we've come from and what we're facing, always with Neuhaus's contagious sense of adventure about it all.

No *mea culpa*

The title might mislead people who were disenchanted by Neuhaus's association with President Bush and were hoping this book would be a *mea culpa* of sorts, making up for his jingoistic, neocon ways by exploring the evils of the American Empire and its incompatibility with Christianity. But this is nothing of the sort. No, the premise of the book is that all times and places are Babylon for Christians, who are temporarily exiled from their true and eternal home in the New Jerusalem. Christians, whenever and wherever they are, remain strangers in a strange land. American Christians, as they ought to know but sometimes don't, are no exception – though Neuhaus always has a caveat to offer about America.

Tour guide in a scary world

21st century American Babylon is different from, say, 19th century Russian Babylon or 5th century African Babylon, and Christians in those times and places faced other challenges and experienced their separation from the New Jerusalem differently than those in American Babylon. "So," Neuhaus seems to say as one who hearts New York (and all of America and some other places) and considers the present as interesting a time as any if not more so, "given that everyone is stuck in Babylon, let me show you around the theological, philosophical, ec-

clesial, cultural, artistic, literary, intellectual and spiritual part of it that is 21st century America." It turns out to be quite a place, and Neuhaus's tour of it worth the price of admission.

Divided into eight semi-interrelated chapters, the book holds together under the unifying theme of exile in a strange, startling and sometimes downright scary world, but always with a sense that home is elsewhere. Several of the sections are adaptations of previously published articles, but Neuhaus weaves them together (a bit loosely) to offer a picture of the general state of things in this American Babylon.

Qualified by biography

Several aspects of his biography and abilities combine to make Neuhaus both profound and readable as a cultural critic and theologian. First, and perhaps most incredibly, he was almost entirely self-taught. His formal education ended with an M.Div. from Concordia Seminary in St. Louis and he never was a professional academic. This insulates him from the twin evils of insider-speak and condescension; he writes knowing the sort of question a genuinely interested layperson is likely to ask.

He explains concepts without making a show of having to explain them, like an acquaintance who senses you have forgotten his name and mentions it in passing before anything can get uncomfortable. Thus he never gets too far ahead of the reader, but also never patronizes. He assumes the reader is tolerably smart and as genuinely interested as the author. His kind of book-learnin' is the equivalent of street smarts in the realm of academia. If you want the official tour, enroll in graduate school. If you really want to know the place, let Neuhaus show you around.

Secondly, the breadth of his expertise is astonishing. More than one person has noted that Neuhaus could discuss, say, the Founding Fathers of America with greater depth of knowledge and insight than the typical Ph.D. whose career was devoted to the subject. And the same would be true whether the topic were T. S. Eliot, the nature of sociology, Reformation history, or a host of other things. Neuhaus was not showing off (any more than usual, at least) with the range of people in his index. He makes connections others could not make, and makes it look effortless. This certainly holds true of

American Babylon; the reader doesn't necessarily notice but definitely benefits from having a tour guide who has been virtually everywhere in the intellectual world. Neuhaus knows what is interesting about 21st century America because he, better than practically anyone, can compare it competently and convincingly to other times and places.

Saying things just so

Thirdly, Neuhaus is a writer first and an expert second. An English major in college who first made a name for himself as a speech writer for Martin Luther King, Jr., Neuhaus not only had many things to say, but had a gift of saying them just so. For example, in explaining this book, he writes, "The argument is that everybody lives in hope, including those who cannot give a reason for their hoping. For everyone, hoping can't be helped." Hard to get lost in that, but it says a lot, and memorably.

Lastly, Neuhaus writes from a vantage point steeped in faith and piety. It is no theoretical doctrine of a New Jerusalem, but a palpable yearning for it that comes through in this book. The evils of his Babylon hurt him, the grandeur of it merits his praise, the "this-ness of it" (as he would say) earns his loyalty, but always his eye is on the horizon and

his ear listening for the trumpet sound that will take him home where all is as it should be.

Though the chapters range far and freely, the principle figure with whom Neuhaus jousts is the late Richard Rorty, who advocated for Ironism — an entirely ironical outlook that could, if not make sense of the world, at least free up the ironist to be original. And since Rorty had the intellectual wherewithal to wander all over the intellectual world, too, it makes for a grand chase as Neuhaus engages him point by point, the churchman combating the atheist on every terrain imaginable.

As it happened, the author was taken home from his Babylon before the book hit the stands. This *American Babylon* of abortionists gunned down in Lutheran churches, empathy-motivated judicial nominees, government-run car companies, and so many other interesting and perhaps dangerous things will have to go without comment from Neuhaus. But this book amounts to a fitting farewell. He seems to say, "So we'll no more go a-roving through this startling *American Babylon*. You'll have to explore it without me. But here, you can use my notes. Enjoy the adventure and I'll see you back home."

— by Peter Speckhard, associate editor

Omnium gatherum



PLTS comes out • It wasn't much of a surprise when Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary's board voted in April to make that school the ELCA's first "Reconciling in Christ" seminary. RIC, if you haven't been paying attention, is the program sponsored by Lutherans Concerned/North America which invites congregations and other church institutions to declare themselves welcoming of GLBT persons. That's how it is billed, though of course it is much more: it is a public identification of an institution with the goals of LC/NA for "full inclusion" of "sexual minorities." Some PLTS students took the initiative to bring this affiliation about. They organized a course—"self-funded," board chair Gary Andeen was clear to state, to the tune of \$3,500. He also said students "conducted" the course, which makes one wonder just how they spent the money. Maybe they paid themselves to teach

themselves—a nice gig if you can get it. Anyway, the outcome of the course was to request the board to affiliate with the program. Ever prudent, the board surveyed alumni to see how they might react. Apparently they didn't respond with the unanimous enthusiasm the board expected, for a subsequent letter from the chair expressed some surprise at the diversity of opinion. That diversity didn't extend to the board itself, which went ahead and approved the request that PLTS seek the RIC designation. The public announcement of this went to great lengths to explain that this really isn't a change, since, in Andeen's words, PLTS "has been quietly living and learning together faithfully in the midst of the church's disagreements about sexual orientation for a long time. With this decision, PLTS will now be living openly with that faithful disagreement." PLTS, it seems, has come out of the closet—though none of

her friends was the least bit surprised. The press release also emphasized that “the RIC program does not specifically address questions regarding the ordination or marriage of openly gay, lesbian, bisexual or trans-gendered persons.” Since the primary purpose of a seminary is to prepare people for ordination, that seems just a tad disingenuous.

Glenn Stone • We are sorry to report the death June 6 of the Rev. Glenn C. Stone, 80. In 1969 he was called as founding editor of our companion journal, *Lutheran Forum*, and also served for many years as executive director, and then as a board member, of the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau. *Forum Letter* itself was the brainchild of Pr. Stone, though he never edited it. He later worked as features editor for *The Lutheran* magazine. He was a kind and gentle man, and a fine churchman. *Requiescat in pace.*

The limits of restraint • It has been appalling to watch the Episcopalians suing one another over property issues as various congregations and dioceses decide to depart from the mother church. The ELCA may see some of that, though it is unlikely because of a difference in polity. But there may be other kinds of unseemly conflict. In the Upstate New York Synod, a congregation has voted to leave the ELCA and affiliate with the LCMS. That went pretty smoothly. The catch was that one member of that congregation is a beloved and respected retired ELCA pastor, and Bishop Marie Jerge told him in no uncertain terms that he would need to leave the con-

gregation and affiliate with an ELCA congregation or she would be forced to remove him from the roster. He told her in no uncertain terms that she could go ahead and do just that; he wasn’t leaving his congregation. Constitutionally, of course, she is within her rights, but the sad story does show that the “restraint in discipline” called for by the 2007 Churchwide Assembly only goes so far.

You got your copy when? • There is no end to frustration expressed by people who get their July issue of *Forum Letter*, say, sometime around Reformation Day. Well, maybe not that bad, but still bad enough. I sympathize; *FL* is mailed from Iowa around the end of the month, and it seldom reaches me in California before the third week of the next month. Since sending *FL* by periodical rate doesn’t seem to be improving the USPS service, we’re going to try again using non-profit standard mail, which will save a good bit of money. My prediction: it might speed up delivery to the coasts and slow down delivery to the rest of the country, thereby bringing about greater equity. But we’re monitoring things to see if this unreasonably prolongs the delivery time (but don’t call us, we’ll call you!), and if it does, we’ll go back to the other way. Meanwhile, please be patient. And if you can’t be patient, you can always take advantage of our electronic edition in lieu of your paper copy. Contact Donna Roche at dkralpb@aol.com for details. Of course then it’s harder to pass *FL* around to others to read, and we know you like to do that.

—by Richard O. Johnson, editor

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