

UMBRIA
Hill Towns, Olives and Grapes
June 15-29, 2014

Bel and I have “done” our beloved Tuscany a number of times, three with large family groups. Last winter several of us put our heads together and decided that we’re definitely partial to that area of central Italy and want to go again (it’s been nine years) – but that we’d alter the destination a bit by shifting to nearby, lesser known Umbria.

As before, Anne did most of the initial heavy lifting by researching enchanting places to stay that would accommodate our clan of ten. Besides Bel and me, this would include Steve’s family (with Anne, Katie and Nicky) from Wisconsin, and my brother Doug and wife Marge, and Eric’s son Niko with partner Breanne from Virginia.

We’d all meet at the Rome airport, pick up two rental vehicles and proceed to our first villa, a short distance away. Basing in Tivoli for four nights, those who had never seen Rome could make a daytime foray there, and there are also a couple of stunning historic sites to visit in Tivoli itself.

A Rocky Start

Bel and I are dumped at the wrong terminal at Chicago O’Hare at the insistence of our bus driver, and it’s only a miracle that Steve and Katie find us as we’re wandering in a deserted part of the airport where there are no officials to help. Then, as we’re waiting to board an 8:40 p.m. flight, the real nightmare begins. We’re informed that there’s a delay: they’ve found “a smoking element” on the plane and will have to hunt for a replacement. This turns into a déjà vu experience; three years before, our flight to Turkey was canceled *twice*, necessitating two nights in Chicago hotels and another in London. Alitalia announces that we’ll leave the next afternoon and that they’ll put us up at a Holiday Inn. After standing endlessly on the dark, hot curb, we discover the airline fouled up and there’s no hotel limo coming. Anne gets on her phone, then runs back to Alitalia; a distant Howard Johnson is booked, and close to 1:00 a.m. our exhausted crew limps up to bed.

We’re due back at the airport by 10:00 the next morning, and we start biting our nails when the departure is delayed two hours. Finally, we lift off after 4:00 p.m. The entire plane cheers in relief.

Getting to Tivoli

Of course we’re worried about what our D.C. confreres will do when we don’t show up at the car rental place in Rome. Anne’s cell doesn’t work in Europe, and there are no messages at Budget. We find that the other four have taken the larger van that Niko will be driving, which leaves the smaller car for Steve’s family. We decide to squeeze the six of us into a sedan for four to save a prohibitive taxi ride. The trick will be to fit in all of us, plus the bags – a hairy jigsaw puzzle. At the same time, we’re dealing with Bel’s lingering bout of the trots, Katie’s sudden nosebleed and Nicky’s injured toe when a suitcase drops on it. Defying all laws of safety, Katie practically sits on Anne’s lap in front, while I crouch down on the floor in back next to Bel and Nicky with only a view of boiling clouds. The three of us have our knees in the air over bags.

We roll out, hoping the authorities don’t stop us. Steve, who hasn’t driven a stick shift in years, must suddenly figure it out while dodging daredevil Italian drivers on the Autostrada without benefit of

the rearview mirror, obscured by a wall of suitcases. Nicky is soon beset by nagging carsickness and keeps muttering for more air.

Clutching the complex printed instructions to find our villa, Sant' Antonio, we lurch around a twisty road through crowded Tivoli and then up a very narrow mountain road. We arrive abruptly at the former monastery/convent and squeeze into a tiny parking spot between trees. It's reassuring to see the rented van. There's a scribbled welcome note on the battered wooden door, and in a relieved, jetlagged fog, the six of us enter and shout for our compatriots who emerge from a distant corner of this vast edifice.

Doug, Marge, Niko and Breanne are eager to conduct a tour of a building so enormous we think it akin to a hoary castle that must have housed a substantial number of early Church brass and followers. Bel and I find our own rambling suite, as do the others. There are a couple of cozy living rooms with piles of history books about the structure. Down worn stone steps is the refectory hall and kitchen (with a gigantic fireplace and blackened flue some ten feet across). Besides endless corridors and rooms with hand-carved, dark furniture – chests, bureaus, chairs, and ceramic stoves in the bedrooms – there is a lovely garden maintained by a nearly invisible gardener, with precipitous stone nooks and walls bright with bougainvillea and other towering, blooming plants. Best of all is the view across the canyon to a veritable Niagara – a 300-foot-tall ribbon of a waterfall crashing down the mountain (the “Grand Cascade” of the Aniene River), visible from many terraces and balconies around our stone fortress. With the golden light of late afternoon highlighting the falls, we all grab cameras to capture panoramic vistas, including the town of Tivoli crowded onto the opposite hill.

While some of us nap, others gather in the living room where conversation drifts to philosopher William James (that Bel is reading), and tales of the supernatural are swapped. An appropriate Sangiovese wine starts off the dinner hour, and Anne comes through with a great fettuccine and baked zucchini with tomatoes. To bed. I wake to booming thunder and rain, and all night we can hear the gentle rush of the falls.

Hadrian's Villa and the Villa d'Este

In two cars we're off to spend our first full day at these two local sites. The first was a retreat for the Emperor Hadrian in the 2nd century A.D.; later he opted to govern from there. There were thirty buildings, a number still not excavated. The complex included thermal baths, temples, a giant amphitheater, and quarters for courtiers, praetorians and slaves. Serene pools are still lined with the remains of Corinthian columns and copies of Greek statues. An impressive museum houses myriad fine busts and sculptures.

After a fine lunch at the villa entrance, we find the Villa d'Este on the other side of Tivoli. We spread out to explore grand stone stairways that take us down and down through gardens in the hanging cliffs, past baroque-style nymphs tucked into grottoes and caves. Everywhere is rushing, falling, shooting water – a series of falls from the top cascade at different heights into a pool, and there's a long avenue of tiny spouting fountains in a row. An indoor gallery displays wall and ceiling paintings and 16th century costumes (when the villa was built).

Darkening skies and thunder bring on rain, and we hurry back to the town center under umbrellas to hunt down our ritual *gelato*. Anne shops on the way home and prepares a feast of chicken legs baked with rosemary, mint risotto, flatbread, and pastries for dessert, washed down with a good Chianti.

A Quiet Day to Enjoy Our Abode

All but Doug, Bel and I have left early on the train to Rome. Just as I descend to the kitchen for breakfast, I hear shrieks from Doug and Bel and find smoke and flames leaping from the gas burner; melted plastic is burning briskly (the kettle was thought to be metal). It takes a while to scrub the stove clean.

I drag a beach chair onto the grand terrace in full sun to watch the falls while reading up on the history of Sant' Antonio. The original section was constructed in 150 B.C.E. The upper parts were rebuilt in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. Then in 1879 an Englishman, Frederick Searle, came to sketch the area and acquired the building for preservation; now it is managed by the Landmark Trust in England. The medieval monastery was grafted onto a Roman villa from the time of Caesar Augustus or even earlier. It's believed that a frequent guest was the poet Horace, born in 65 B.C.E. Also I read that Virgil and Catullus attended social gatherings here, sitting in this garden, for conversations of "wise men." They were brought together by Gaius Cilnius Maecenas, minister to Octavian, who became the first Emperor, Caesar Augustus. Some 200 villas were built on this edge of Tivoli by Roman aristocracy seeking relief from the heat of the city. Above the cool, thundering falls, hidden in the trees, are the ruins of the first-century B.C.E. Roman temples of Vesta and the Sibyl.

The monastery was established in 1583, dedicated to S. Antonio of Padua, the resident friars following the 12th and 13th century teachings of St. Francis and St. Anthony. The Pope once stayed here and complained of drafts and "rats as big as rabbits." Eventually, the monastery became a convent for nuns – whose framed pictures adorn the miles of walls. The signs of antiquity are in every cranny: faded, chipped frescoes tell religious tales, and saints look down on us in rare paintings.

It's a lazy day for Doug and me to review stories of our own family history and dynamics – an opportunity we don't often get. Later in the evening, Steve's contingent and Marge limp in. They've traversed Rome entirely on foot, ending with a harrowing cab ride to find the correct train station on time. Much later, Niko and Breanne arrive, their own all-day hike a breeze for young athletes in great shape. All the sights they visited during their intense trek on foot Bel and I know intimately, having been in Rome many times, including for two years in the early 1960s when Bel served with the UN.

The Next Legs of the Journey: Amelia and Montefalco

A smooth getaway takes us north on the Autostrada, Our two vehicles are quickly separated. Soon we're entering the Appennine Range, a string of mountains that stretches nearly 900 miles lengthwise down the center of the Italian peninsula. We've agreed to stop and try to meet in the southern Umbrian town of Amelia. Our van contingent spots Amelia's grey stone buildings crowded onto a high peak. We park in the base piazza and board a shuttle bus that takes us through one of four imposing main gates, past quiet, ancient houses, and up impossibly narrow, corkscrew cobbles to the top. Some say Amelia is the oldest town in Umbria, possibly going back a thousand years B.C.E., occupied by the Etruscans and then the Romans. It's noted for its Etruscan limestone walls, three and a half meters thick. At the summit, we find a little park with an incredible panorama spread out below us: cultivated squares, poppy fields, and dark cypress trees. We decide to hike down the steep street, and never finding Steve's family, duck into a tiny hole-in-the-wall eatery for what we think may be the best restaurant meal of the trip – homemade pasta, Tuscan legume soup, soft, fresh mozzarella in tuna/tomato salad, marvelous bread.

Cutting through the heart of the hazy blue Appennines, we continue north, past villages with perfumed flowering hedges and hibiscus, and then swaths of wild broom (*ginestra*) in the countryside. Hay rolls dot the golden fields. Breanne proves to be expert at controlling the GPS and figuring the coordinates. It takes us onto a tiny rural road with bushes leaning in – dense wooded areas that then open out into broad vistas. Pale olive groves are everywhere. Puffy cumulus clouds create shifting shadows that march across the fields. At one point the gold fields sweep straight up to touch the clouds.

Niko drives up into Montefalco, our destination for the night – chosen because nine years ago we'd stopped briefly, loved it and hoped to get back. Five minutes after parking in the big main piazza and settling into our Hotel Affreschi, Steve's tribe arrives. Bel and I are off immediately with them to appreciate again the museum and church of San Francesco, one of the loveliest in Umbria and famous for its 15th century frescoes of the life of St. Francis by Benozzo Gozzoli.

We notice a flock of exotic, gleaming MGs beginning to congregate in the piazza, preparing to participate the next morning in a parade of the sleek cars. World Cup soccer is on and at every café extra chairs are set up outside with large-screen TVs blaring. Crowds are screaming and cheering for their Italian team (which sadly loses). Some of our group join the throngs for a convivial beer, and then we converge at La Coccorone, the memorable restaurant where we had eaten years before. (Montefalco was called La Coccorone in the Middle Ages.) It takes forever for the grill master to cook alarming, platter-size inch-and-a-half-thick steaks. After finishing with our favorite tiramisu after 10:00 p.m., we totter off to bed in spiffy, ultra-modern rooms (though the hotel itself is ancient).

To Our Destination

After the others visit the San Francesco church, we're on for a lunch stop in Spello, another ancient hill town dating back to the first century B.C.E. It sits on the flanks of Mount Subasio (as does nearby Assisi). As we stroll up the Via Cavour lined with shops and churches, we watch tents and plastic tunnels being erected at intervals all along this main street; grids and line drawings are being measured and painted on the pavement under the canopies. Picking up flyers, we learn that Amelia is preparing for tomorrow's famed Flower Festival that draws thousands from across the country. Later, great piles of brilliant flower petals and blooms will fill in the drawings to create fantastic, elaborate "paintings."

We pick a fine restaurant for lunch on a tented terrace at the back of a posh wine shop. Good pasta (and I think Nicky had one of the first of several meals of wild boar – a specialty in a region where boar hunting is popular). The resident sommelier hovers seductively over Anne and has her taste the wine he's picked before pouring for everybody. Then we all wander off to meet in mid-afternoon at the designated church where we can escape the blistering sun.

Reclaiming our cars at the bottom of the town, we set out in caravan for the villa – our home base for the next week. Niko leads, with Breanne carefully monitoring the GPS. I think we'll hear that machine's female voice in our sleep for weeks: "In 700 meters, enter a round-about. Take the third exit and turn right, then left, and left..." (There are an inordinate number of round-about in Italy, now taking the place of the traffic lights of long ago.) Sometimes the lady has trouble recognizing sharp hairpin turns or misses a blocked exit/detour and we hear "recalculating" but mostly she's very trustworthy.

At (Marsciano?), some fifteen miles from our destination, Anne contacts Maria, our German house custodian, who suggests that because we're heading into pretty remote country, we stop here at a supermarket to pick up supplies. Very efficiently, Anne hands out shopping lists for three groups and we scurry around with several carts collecting everything from toilet paper to granola to beer to eggs (not kept in a cooler). It helps to know Italian. We fluster the checkout clerk a bit with something like twenty big plastic bags (that we must pay for) thrust at her by a group of ten foreigners. An hour later, we jam the bags into every crevice of the two cars and are off for the final "assault."

When we're within several tiny villages of the villa "Il Nestorello," the terrain gets wilder. We climb and climb, taking in the breathtaking, classic panoramas of Umbria – olive groves, vineyards, mountains, green woods and brilliant fields. There are many false starts at nebulous forks in the single-track dirt roads, and difficulty turning around when we make a mistake. When we ask somebody in Mercatello, our closest village, for Il Nestorello, he shrugs blankly.

Finally, we round the last rough curve and bump through a stone archway, the entry to our splendid eyrie. Maria is on hand to greet us. She has complicated instructions, mostly having to do with sets of keys for every room and dire warnings about guarding our valuables (she claims there are robbers lurking). The house is enormous. It goes on and on, and I never do find out where everyone is sleeping. The kitchen is downstairs with several bedrooms (accessed from outside). A couple of living rooms and bedrooms are upstairs. There's a nice pool hidden in greenery up a flight of stone steps, and lush gardens with huge, fragrant bushes of lavender. Jasmine, roses, wisteria, and bougainvillea frame our outdoor eating terrace. From there, we look out northeast to distant hills where at night we watch the lights of Perugia wink on. Rising up directly west of us is a very steep hill (small mountain) with what looks like a ruined arch on top.

Anne is on the job, producing supper in short order: heavy cream, egg yolks, lemon juice and zest, whipped into hot pasta to thicken, along with a fine salad. We carry our plates out to the terrace. This is the first time that we're so remote on a group trip that we haven't been able to receive Wimbledon on TV (and the World Cup). Even with wi fi, the kids can't get tennis on their computers. (Momentary sadness.)

Bel and I draw a fine room upstairs, though the wattage of the lights threatens to damage our eyesight, and night reading is curtailed. But that's all right. Lying in bed, I relish the feeling of being embraced in antiquity; I look up to huge, dark, angled beams and then rows of smaller beams filled in with weathered bricks. The floors are uneven old bricks, and the walls of our bath are rough stone.

Getting Acquainted With Il Nestorello

Maria tells us that the villa is probably about 200 years old, originally housing peasants and farm animals. It was part of Monte Vibiano, the huge area *comune* (medieval administrative district). Some twenty years ago our villa was sold to a Japanese woman and her British husband. (villagers know it as the "Japanese House"; they don't recognize Il Nestorello, as we found).

We wake to sun streaming down on a swath of wild yellow broom just outside the formal gardens. At Katie's insistence, Steve's family is off early in a cloud of dust to take in the Spello Flower Festival. Doug and Marge explore the garden and vegetable patch, with zucchini and lettuce we can pick.

Then Niko, Breanne, and Doug organize an expedition to climb to the arch on our nearby little mountain. From the pool I watch their progress as they emerge periodically, weaving among the

clumps of broom, and then they disappear in dense green foliage above. It turns out it was too brambly to beat their way to the top and they give up. After lunch, Niko and Breanne are determined to conquer it, and they go back, finding a slightly easier way, though coming back down was horrible, they said; they are even more scratched than in the first ascent.

Steve's contingent reports that the crowds in Spello were so dense they could barely move along the main street. But the flower designs were well worthwhile, and there was a colorful procession.

The afternoon is spent doing laundry and hanging out, reading in one or another of the lovely outdoor nooks, and swimming (the spring water is cold).

Dinner: Nicoise salad: greens, tuna, hardboiled eggs, potato, cherry tomatoes and black olives. (I'm mentioning the menus because several in the group are anxious to have reminders of the wonderful meals Anne concocted.) There's also pasta with tomatoes.

After supper is another of the in-depth discussions that have become historic and significant on these family trips. This time we share stories about family dynamics and challenges growing up with our parents – spreading over several generations.

As evening comes on, Bel, Doug, and I hike up to a branch in the road that's a steep track leading to what we later learn is the ruins of the Cernobio Benetto monastery. On the way, we get a great view of Monte Vibiano, the tiny village complex with a castle that looks, on its pinnacle, like one huge structure dominating the valley. A deer bounds across our minimal road that's hacked out of rock; on one side the terrain climbs sharply; on the other, it falls off. We come back where there's Frisbee tossing, and a hot game of Bananagrams on the kitchen table. Niko gets out his computer to show us all the photos he's taken so far.

Monte Vibiano

Another fairly laid-back day. After a lazy breakfast on our terrace, we're off to check out Monte Vibiano, the tiny village that dominates the landscape. It's absolutely quiet, not a soul visible. Thinking about a cappuccino stop, we case our village of Mercatello, but find nothing open. Niko does discover an ominous rattle under our car when we're backing up, and decides we'll need to take it to a Budget rental place to be checked out. Maria phones for us and reports that there's a Budget at the railroad station in Perugia, so plans are made for an expedition tomorrow to this capital city of the region of Umbria.

Steve, Nicky, and Katie are anxious to climb to the arch too, so Niko and Breanne sign on for a third trip up the mountain. They find the slightly easier route to the top in thirty minutes, and we slouches at the villa spot distant stick figures climbing onto the ruin. We wave, and Doug sends up a resounding yodel. Nearly an hour and a half passes and we begin to worry when the climbers don't return. Eventually, they drag in, torn and bleeding. They couldn't find the same way down (there were no hints of openings), and Niko ended up leading the group with a club, beating down ferocious, dense, shoulder-high bramble/pricker bushes. Nicky shows us a video he made of Niko whacking/crunching away at what looks and sounds like an expedition into the heart of the most challenging jungle in the world. Awful but hilarious!

Anne and Steve shop in the little village of Spina, not far away, where Anne has established a lovely friendship with the butcher (and can proudly show off her Italian). He carefully selects a good cut of

pork and ties it for roasting this evening, along with rosemary potatoes. Ice cream and pie top off our dinner.

Perugia

We're off early to the capital city of the region of Umbria. Our van rattle seems to have disappeared after leaving the dirt roads. At Budget, they check it and find nothing wrong, so we leave the cars there and walk up to a nifty little electric "mini metro" that ferries people up to the old city. From the station we take three long escalators to the top where we come out onto a huge open piazza, and where all the streets are (delightfully) pedestrian only. We're surrounded by medieval buildings, though the city's history goes back to Etruscan times. Lots of Roman involvement and then Perugia figured prominently in Church and papal affairs.

We had been thinking Perugia might be a drag – one more big city and crowds of tourists. Instead, we're pleasantly surprised. There are few people in the central IV Novembre piazza, which is charming. We dash immediately to the superb National Gallery of Umbria, and are further impressed. Starting at the top floor, we're surrounded by hundreds of examples of the most magnificent 12th and 13th century art – lots of the primitive religious triptychs that I like especially. I also appreciate the numerous stone banquettes in most of the rooms because I have to sit often. Afterwards, we dodge a couple of short showers to enjoy cappuccino and pastries under an awning. We spread out to wander the back streets with their tall, dark buildings, then find a pizza restaurant for lunch. Doug, Marge, Bel and I hike to a lovely park at the edge of the old city that looks out over the valley below. Back to rendezvous at the central fountain.

We descend to the mini-metro, collect our cars and speed off to Deruta, the primary center for the best pottery production in Italy – where we've been a number of times. Now it seems a bit somber and diminished, and we're not as excited as in the past – though cups of *gelato* revive our spirits. Our GPS leads us home on back roads that pass tiny villages and neat rows of grapes. After nine hours of trekking, it's a relief to pull up to Il Nestorello.

A Lazy, Reflective Day Triggers Provocative Meal Discussions

I wake to find a dead two-inch scorpion on the windowsill, and then a live six-inch walking stick figuring out how to get out of the bathtub.

One by one we straggle into the kitchen for a late, leisurely breakfast. With no pressing agenda, we fall naturally into one of our communal conversations that draws out personal, deeply held thoughts and positions. Someone brings up the Dalai Lama (probably around Steve's perennial quest for the elusive interview with His Holiness – possible only if he travels to India). This triggers opinions and definitions of Buddhism, the efficacy and prevalence of meditation – our own ways of benefiting from some form of quiet. Then we shift to how each of us writes; what motivates and moves us. This, in turn, leads once again to a discussion of family dynamics and histories, with seemingly endless, fascinating quirks and obsessions and bugaboos to probe and place under the familial microscope. We also get into our individual philosophies regarding taking trips.

Bringing out the books most of us have carefully selected and packed is, I believe, one of the delights of traveling. Eventually, though, we feel the need to relieve long stretches of reading in our secluded nooks with vigorous exercise or further exploration of our captivating environs. So, when the early gloomy clouds give way mid-morning to promising sun, we put down our books (or computers or iPads). Some suggest an expedition to the 10th century monastery up the road. After walks of varying

lengths, we're back to our reading or sedentary games – the rhythm of vacation sloth. At the pool, I watch the progress of spectacular, crisp, cumulus clouds marching up the mountain past the ruined arch. Then black storm clouds gather over Perugia, with flashes of gold shafting down for a few seconds to dance on the wheat fields. The wind is picking up. Time to see if we can help with supper.

Dinner is splendid: eggplant parmigiano over pasta. Then, dawdling over Anne's Swedish Visiting Cake and assorted ice creams, the topic of belief comes up from someone – always a lively choice among our very diverse crew. Who believes in the existence of a motivating, guiding factor beyond or outside our physical beings? What about the origins of matter, life? What do we think about quantum mechanics? Chaos theory? How does this work? Then, how would we define consciousness? Do we have souls? Steve – whose current, consuming, interest is the science/consciousness/spirit discussion, and is very invested in probing the capacities of consciousness – has trouble with the idea of individual souls surviving intact. For some others, soul – as the essence of human life that exists separately from its temporary physical shell – is closely aligned to (or synonymous with) consciousness. It lives on after physical death (though whether with a discrete identity is up for grabs). Does it matter? The volume in the room heats up. Katie, Nicky, Breanne and Niko vehemently stick to what science dictates, and declare that our brains can figure out reality, and there's nothing beyond, nothing mysterious or mystical. Niko: "I'm happy now with this life and all the challenges and excitement this presents. I don't believe in or need anything more."

By 9:00 p.m. we're talked out or at an impasse. Steve seems open to currently unknowable possibilities. I think all this began when Bel asked him what it was about St. Francis or Assisi that had moved him on our last Italy trip. We remember how Francis broke from the Catholic hierarchy of his day. Marge and Breanne talk about what it was like growing up Catholic. Others, brought up Protestant or atheist, recount how they moved away from these parental influences – quit or "evolved." Then we dig into what of value we've gotten from our parents. What has been the significance of the church in our lives, if any? Doug and I remember how central and significant the church was for our own father, yet we have real doubts as to whether he believed in God or life beyond this one; he never discussed this. For him, as for many, the church was a strong, organizing force in his Connecticut town; its function was a critical social one. The church was a community in itself, with responsibility for the life and care not only of its members, but of all citizens in the town. My mother was a different animal: she assumed the same sense of responsibility, but felt she could do this easily because she was in constant conversation with God all day – "as close and natural as breathing," she always said. And especially toward the end of her 102-year lifespan, she said she could hardly wait to get on with her "next job," and that we humans are still in kindergarten as for as learning goes. I allow as how I too think this life is for learning, for moving up a ladder of comprehension, for practicing how to perform tasks conscientiously and well, for absorbing the lessons of human interaction – and for being open, in terms of life and knowledge, to limitless possibilities beyond anything currently understood or dreamed of. I believe there is "something" (possibly an unconscious part of me?) that knows, that is not necessarily pulling strings, but is aware and constantly offering opportunities to choose, to move well – and that can also protect.

Assisi

After our discussion of Francis and the power of his person and simple message that has so deeply influenced the world, we're primed for a journey to Assisi today. The morning dawns clear.

First stop: the huge basilica at the base of Mount Subasio, below the actual town of Assisi. Construction was begun in the 16th century. One of its functions was to house the *Porziuncola*, the tiny

chapel where St. Francis first understood his vocation, where he renounced the world to live in poverty. A number of small huts were built around this chapel, and it was in one of these that Francis died in 1226. We queue up silently to enter the little chapel, so poignantly dwarfed by the majesty of Santa Maria's soaring dome above it. Visitors squeeze onto minimal pews to pray (room for only one abreast).

We start ascending the mountain to park in an underground structure and trudge up the steep ramp to the massive church looming above us. Pope Gregory IX ordered the Basilica of San Francesco to be constructed to honor Francis following his death, and he is buried there. We join wall-to-wall throngs surging through the lower and upper parts of the church, the walls famously covered with frescoes by Giotto, Cimabue and Simone Martini. The frescos by Giotto circling the upper section depict Francis' life. Masses are being chanted in several chapels, and monks stationed around sternly admonish the chatterers to be silent: "This is a church, not a marketplace."

A walk that is longer, harder and steeper than I remember, takes us up a main street past all the lovely pink stone buildings, many with kitschy souvenir shops and *gelato* stands. Finally, we arrive in the big piazza where supposedly Francis repudiated his wealthy merchant father, saying the only father he had was God. We trail our fingers in the central fountain where Katie played as a baby and hunt a little sidewalk restaurant for a lasagna lunch just as it begins to sprinkle. It's even cold now.

Our next lap takes us further up the flanks of Mt. Subasio, our cars snaking around so many spiraling hairpin turns (barely possible for our wide van) that we begin to think maybe we've missed our destination. But then we spot the familiar taxi stand and a glimpse of grey stone, partially buried in the side of a hill. This is the Carceri, the hermitage St. Francis built as a retreat for his monks, and where he preached to the birds. It seems the most palpably sacred spot in Assisi, and afterwards we all agree this is the highlight of the day.

The clouds are increasingly dark and glowering, which makes our walk to the entrance, overhung with dense foliage, even more mysterious. "*Silenzio*," both inside and outside, say the signs. We tiptoe through a tunnel and into the little hermitage. Everything is in miniature: tiny closets of chapels with places for only three at a time to kneel, stone stairways so narrow we must almost turn sideways to navigate, and doorways four feet high, built deliberately to keep the brothers humble as they stoop through.

We emerge into forest in back of the hermitage and walk quietly along the gnarly woods path cut into the steep hillside. It drops off to the right where exposed roots of ancient trees are growing around rocks. Undoubtedly, Francis walked here many times. The rain has held off – fortunately – but everything is humid and dark. We peer into little caves or prayer niches where statues and crosses are tucked, and where one sculptured depiction of Francis lies prostrate on the ground. At the end of the walk is a tiny, open chapel with log benches set up outside. A nun is praying. It's been totally silent the whole time.

Everybody is pretty exhausted when we get home. Pasta a la carbonara is dinner, and then the talk goes to our favorite cities or places – on this trip or in our lives.

The Cantina Adventure and an Announcement

It's our last day at the villa. We're up late, feeling lazy, needing to rest. It's cloudy and cooler. We linger after breakfast on the terrace while Steve recounts the history of his and Anne's "To The Best of

Our Knowledge” radio program (created 23 years ago). How it’s put together, the dynamics of staff interactions... Somehow this leads into more family history, especially about how my family (the Hills) was closely interwoven over the years with the Baker family in Connecticut, whose various members had a lot to do with my life direction.

Doug, Marge, Niko, Breanne, Bel and I hike up the road to a half-hidden house we’ve seen across the valley. It’s along a high, dirt road surrounded by gold broom, thickets, glimpses back at our villa, and a stunning view of Monte Vibiano on its lone pinnacle.

At a pickup lunch, remarkably while Steve is casually videotaping our table, Niko announces that he and Breanne plan to be married next summer!! Delighted congratulations follow. Breanne expects to receive her PhD this spring, and Niko his acceptance into grad school, so they’ll be on their way to important next directions in their lives – or to what the older generation recognizes may be a more uncertain future than they themselves had to deal with decades before. Throughout the week, Bel, in particular, has been exploring with them the content of their studies, and their academic futures and values as they think through their next steps.

At 4:00 we all head for an appointment at the Cantina Castello Monte Vibiano in Mercatello. This is the winery owned and run by the family of Andrea Fasola Bologna, including his son Lorenzo (and grandchildren?) Andrea and sister Camilla, who all live, I think, in that first-century castle on the hill. Andrea welcomes us into the sleek modern reception area and soon leads us out to a fleet of little open electric vehicles, like golf carts for four. Niko, Breanne and Steve are drivers, among other international visitors. We parade through the town of Mercatello and out dirt roads to the 150-acre family olive grove and vineyard, then climb out for a spiel about the history. The olives date back hundreds of years, while the grapes are twenty years old, the vineyard having been restored to wine production in 1998. The long views over the gold and green cultivated squares, and neatly lined up rows of grapes, are classic Umbria.

Nicky takes over the wheel from Steve on the return trip, and Katie hops in for a brief spin. Andrea meets us and points out that the whole operation is very “green.” Solar panels on the roof charge the batteries for the electric carts at night, thick insulation keeps the atmosphere temperate inside the building.

We visit the room with shining steel tanks where the wine is fermented, the several varieties carefully marked. In another room we see smallish oak casks for further ripening. There’s a film honoring the family and their production.

Then we’re seated back in the reception area, where all the chairs and tables and wood trim in the room is made from recycled oak casks. In front of each of us is a little white tablet (like a pill). Andrea pours a bit of water on each, and magically they puff up and grow to six-inch towers; we have wet towelettes to wipe our hands! Then, ceremoniously, Andrea and Camilla bring, in succession, four wines to sample: white, rose, a raw red, and a very smooth red. In between, we get toast on which Andrea dribbles their excellent olive oil – after opening *tiny* bottles (two inches high), which they freeze and unfreeze “to keep the water out.” They also offer a marvelous, sharp cheese, akin to a parmesan. Of course, Andrea is encouraging people to buy. He sells to the best restaurants, shops, ships, and airlines all over the world. I’m rather amazed when Bel and Steve succumb to the spiel and decide to split a case of 108 (!) of the tiny oil bottles, to be shipped home. Conversation pieces for sure. One of the best parts of the afternoon for me is carrying on a long, complex conversation in

effortless Italian with Camilla, who wants to know my background, about our life and work in Italy, etc. It feels very reassuring that after more than half a century, I can just pull out a drawer without thinking, and the language is there.

For supper a Spanish omelet (sautéed potatoes and onions, baked with eggs and cream). With tiramisu in honor of Bel's birthday (he was unsuccessfully trying to escape the subject). Marge brings out one of the special wines she bought at the cantina, and there's a good Sangiovese from Montefalco that Steve had picked up there. It's 10 p.m. and dark on the terrace as we all share our best experiences of the trip. Then we think back to remember the most memorable and also most scary trips of our lives. We hear some rich stories before retiring to pack.

Todi

It's a long drive back to the airport in Rome, so Anne suggests we break en route at Todi. Like other hill towns in the region, Todi was first settled by Umbrians in the 8th and 7th centuries B.C.E., then passed to the Etruscans, then Romans. Reportedly, Hannibal was stopped by its double-thick stone walls after his victory at nearby Lake Trasimeno.

We're stopped too (lost as the GPS lady is flummoxed by the sharp turns), at one of several enormous gates through the encircling wall. We promptly lose Steve's car, park below and start hiking up one of the steep streets (actually steps). While Doug, Marge, Bel and I recuperate from the climb with a cappuccino in a back alley, Niko and Breanne *run* to the top, over a mile, to see where we are. We'd agreed to meet Steve's clan in the main square, Piazza del Popolo.

Eventually, we all make it to the top and meet at the piazza. It's vast, charming, and there aren't many people. After the others climb the long steps to the main cathedral dominating the piazza, Niko insists that I go too to see the enormous fresco that covers one soaring wall around a rose window. It is remarkable – looks like a depiction of heaven with Jesus (God?) presiding over joyous angels in the upper section, and then the figures that grow darker and more anguished below – purgatory perhaps. It's called "The Universal Judgment," by Ferrau Faenzone, reflecting Michelangelo, though not matching his prowess.

Anne has scouted out a jewelry shop on a side street. The only item I've been looking for on this trip is a chunky necklace to wear for Lark's wedding in July. I ponder and succumb to a chain of amethysts. Anne also finds us a lovely restaurant for lunch overlooking the valley panorama. Most of us opt for unusual pastas, while Nicky again goes for wild boar.

Another of the several coincidences/miracles during the trip: After we've picked up our car (Niko found a spot in the upper piazza), we weave down the torturous streets and are just about to exit the city when we spot Steve's family climbing into their car in a lower lot. So we stay in close tandem all the way to Rome (stopping once for a sip of gas in our almost empty van). The GPS takes us neatly to the Hilton Hotel, adjacent to our international terminal at Fiumicino airport and Budget rentals. We unload the bags, Niko, Doug and Steve return the cars, and we flop in comfortable rooms. Pizzas in the bar with a rose wine that Marge had saved from the Monte Vibiano cantina. Farewells to Doug, Marge, Niko and Breanne, who have an early morning flight.

Our own flight is later in the afternoon. Ironically, Anne manages to arrange all our boarding passes and seats – except hers; her seat can't be secured until just before we board. And then on the plane, as we're juggling seats, her passport disappears. For ten frantic minutes we're all crawling around

hunting it, then success as it turns up under a seat. An uneventful flight, though difficult for my restless back. We're soon out on the muggy curb waiting for our respective buses to Madison and Milwaukee. After a taxi to the condo at 11:00 p.m., Bel and I fall into bed like zombies.

Verdict: another fine, memorable trip. It was the collective gifts of ten enthusiastic, talented, thoughtful, generous players who together made this adventure the perfectly calibrated "symphony" that it proved once again to be. Each time, I stand back in wonderment at the pretty unusual phenomenon of a large, diverse family group that can travel harmoniously, uniformly sensitive to the needs of each person. For a family that cares and shares in this way, I say thank you all!

Lisa Paulson
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