

DreamSeeker Magazine

Voices from the Soul



A First-Time Visit To an Old-Time Place

C. Jack Orr

The Crazy and Wonderful Power of Song

Joan K. King

Sentimental Faith versus the God Who Is

Luanne Austin

The Descendant of the Man Who Built a Chair for Jesus

Gregory Hartzler-Miller

The Scab

Joe Franzen

Lessons from My Father's Lamp

Elizabeth Raid

Marginalia

*What's Wrong with
"Doing What's Best for the Kids"?*

Valerie Weaver-Zercher

Reel Reflections

"Signs" and Wonders

Dave Greiser

and much more

Autumn 2002

Volume 2, Number 4

Editorial: Sweet in Sad

Perhaps I am too swayed by unease about the current state of the world, some of which is conveyed in my Kingsview column, but this seems to me a particularly tumultuous issue of *DreamSeeker Magazine*. There is much storminess in it, from the story of his father's suicide told by recent high school graduate Joe Franzen, through the account of the living Alzheimer's death Elizabeth Raid's father is suffering, to the haunting meditations on life and aging Barbara Shisler offers in her poetry.

That is not the end of it. Jack Orr and Luanne Austin, each in unique but overlapping ways, tell of journeys away from or toward the church, of times when the church seemed stale or dead. Meanwhile Dan Hertzler, reviewing books on the environment, takes on the pain of the entire planet, and I find myself echoing him in my column. Then in ways smaller in scale though not significance, Valerie Weaver-Zercher addresses the cultural winds ceaselessly telling parents to make of their children more and more and more.

But if there is much trouble to face and sorrow to experience, how much faith shines also in these autumnal pages. Franzen finds hope within his loss. Joan K. King's comments on the power of congregational singing dovetail with Orr's testimony to the power of hymns to bring him home even as Austin's entire article seems ultimately to become a hymn of faith in the God who "is." Gregory Hartzler-Miller tells vividly of how in a dream he met "a

man in Christ." Dave Greiser's review of "Signs" reminds us that even in the secular media some are exploring questions of faith. And Noel King's bemused inability to grasp the power of blinking punctures all the seriousness before it gets too far out of hand.

As editor I never fully know in advance what shape a particular issue will take. Sometimes promised writing misses the deadline and falls back to another issue. Sometimes a gem shows up just before deadline, then, though slipping in at the last minute, transforms the entire feel of an issue.

This time, as I worked article by article, I felt blessed by many unexpected flashes of grace. Then toward the end I felt goose bumps as I saw it all falling together. What stirred the tingling was, precisely, salvation juxtaposed with suffering, sunshine with shadow, being lifted up with falling low. Sometimes the testimonies are in faith language, sometimes less so, but rarely, at least as I see it, does a writer miss the mark, because no contributor fails in some way to see light within dark, sweet within sad.

That seems also often the shape of our planet this autumn, filled with so much storm yet so much also to be held dear. No one can know precisely what world these articles may be traveling through in coming months, but let them in some way fit with what is to come, and testify implicitly or explicitly of the one about whom it is said that the light shines in the darkness.

—Michael A. King

No contributor fails in some way to see light within dark, sweet within sad.

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IN THIS ISSUE

Autumn 2002, Volume 2, Number 4

Editorial: Sweet in Sad	ii
Poetry	
<i>Black and White at the Family Reunion</i> • 3;	
<i>Family Photo</i> • 16; <i>Hanging On</i> • 24;	
<i>Old Women</i> • iv (back cover)	
Barbara Esch Shisler	
A First-Time Visit to an Old-Time Place	5
C. Jack Orr	
The Crazy and Wonderful Power of Song	10
Joan K. King	
Sentimental Faith versus the God Who Is "I Am"	13
Luanne Austin	
The Descendant of the Man Who Built a Chair for Jesus	17
Gregory Hartzler-Miller	
The Scab	22
Joe Franzen	
Lessons from My Father's Lamp	25
Elizabeth Raid	
Marginalia	28
<i>So What's Wrong with "Doing What's Best for the Kids"?</i>	
Valerie Weaver-Zercher	
Reel Reflections	31
<i>"Signs" and Wonders</i>	
Dave Greiser	
Kingsview	33
<i>It All Ends</i>	
Michael A. King	
Books, Faith, World & More	38
<i>Time to Pay Attention to the Environmental Crisis: Review of Three Books</i>	
Daniel Hertzler	
The Turquoise Pen	43
<i>Mary Ann's Secret</i>	
Noël R. King	

Black and White at the Family Reunion

The day is ending as we gather on the farmhouse porch,
candles, poems, and hymn books in hand,
our family rituals familiar and easy as the years go by.

We begin with the poems, each choice
haunted by an afternoon quarrel
that tastes bitter even now after ice cream
in the sweet June Virginia dusk.

We cradle in our aging bones the angst
of childhood. The grandchildren marvel,
the in-laws set their teeth.

Will there ever be a morning? cries Emily;
The quality of mercy is never strained;
Something there is that doesn't love a wall.

Poem follows poem in mixed voices.

When 8-year-old Ben tunes his guitar,
we sing "Down in the Valley"
in careful time to his tender pluckings.

A white cow comes to the fence at the sound of singing.

She stares, rapt and motionless, through the hymns:

"The Lord is My Shepherd,"
"Blest Be the Tie That Binds."

Is she curious, amused, devout?

Who can resist the impulse of laughter?

Once, when I was Ben's age,

I stood at our farmhouse window

and shouted at my family,

"I only love Blacky (a cow) and Jesus!

Black and white,

Icon and bovine,

The holy cow.

—*Barbara Esch Shisler, Telford, Pennsylvania, is on the pastoral team at Perkasie (Pa.) Mennonite Church, anticipating retirement in fall 2003. She wonders about this next transition but imagines more of the good gifts that have come her way . . . one of which is poetry.*

A First-Time Visit To an Old-Time Place

C. Jack Orr

“**A**nd Can It Be” is not only a hymn. It is the question friends ask as they observe my recent religious behavior. I, too, am astonished. Having once escaped from fundamentalism and all its cousins, I can now be caught reading evangelical theology, visiting evangelical churches, and singing evangelical hymns. The words of T.S. Eliot in the *Four Quartets* give the best explanation I can offer of this emerging intrigue:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

An Old-Time Place

Fundamentalism was my starting place. I was the son of a fundamentalist minister with all the rights, privileges, and aggravations that go therewith. Among the privileges were belonging to a spirited community, sharing a mission, learning speaking skills from charismatic evangelists, meeting my wife, and singing gospel songs. As for aggravations, sitting on a hard pew six times a week and a record seven on Easter is an

apt metaphor for the restraints that limited my teenage *élan*.

A more serious restriction was placed on grace. Of course, salvation was free by grace and not of works, but there was one exception. At least to my adolescent ears, one monumental cognitive work was required: hair-splitting, doctrinal certainty. Fornication was forgivable but doubt meant damnation. Many of my friends chose the more forgivable offense. I could control my behavior to draconian extremes but could not control my mind. I was born to doubt.

Doubt detection flourished in the fundamentalism of my youth. Right beliefs were detected through right words. People who did not “speak the language” were probably “not saved.”

At any moment a nuance of linguistic deviance called into question the salvation of Mennonites, Pentecostals, or other “Arminians.” Not surprisingly, hometown suspicions were aroused when I entered Messiah College.

At Messiah, I discovered the power of vital ideas. Some vital ideas were also troubling ideas. Beyond the intentions of a caring faculty, I developed questions about God, the Bible, and the boundaries of the Christian community.

When I took these questions home, they were received as threats and insults, arrows flung against the

fabric of friendship, family, and faith. Agreement was the ultimate test of love. Not wanting to hurt loved ones, I silenced my voice but not my thoughts. The choice was clear. I could have my faith or my mind, but not both. I chose my mind.

Ceaseless Exploration

The secular university seemed the logical place to find an unfettered intellectual haven. I became a university professor. Academe would be my

church. My mission: To help students think about their thinking so as to improve their lives. With no social pressure to be a theist, all criticism of Christianity was welcomed. On the other hand, critiques of that criticism were also invited. Critical

rationalism became my daily meditation. Then, while marching to intellectual Zion, I encountered two surprises—one an epiphany, the other a pestilence.

On the side of epiphany, mysticism emerged as the best refuge from dogmatism. In Scott Peck’s words, “If you meet someone who thinks she has all the answers, who has God all sewn up in her back pocket, then you have not met a mystic” (*Golf and the Spirit*, New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999, p. 126) Mysticism, not atheism, guided my quest for freedom. “The Tao that can be named is not the Eternal Tao,” “The finger that points to

the moon is not the moon.” “A name is a prison, God is free” (from Nikos Kazantzakis, as quoted by Loren Eiseley in *The Invisible Pyramid*, New York: Scribner’s, 1970, p. 31), and similar sentiments created within my explorations a space for grace.

Then there was pestilence. My first university teaching position revealed that fundamentalism does not have a monopoly on restricted thinking. If you believe it does, spend an afternoon with a logical positivist. Circular reasoning and arbitrary judgments pervade secular thought. In some quarters of academe, there is an unspoken code: “Thou shall not discuss anything that really matters.”

For example, Ray was an outstanding analytic philosopher. He was visiting with me in a church setting. He wanted to talk about immortality. “I do not know how we could be immortal,” he said, “but I wish we were. It would take a miracle to bring consciousness back to matter; but then I can’t account for how matter at birth takes on consciousness. What do you think?”

“Ray,” I replied, “I feel intimidated talking with you. I know what analytic philosophers can do with mushy speech. Take your question back to the Philosophy Department. Surely your colleagues discuss immortality.”

“No, no, we don’t, not personally,” said Ray. “Never have we talked about life, death, or what is truly vital to us.”

Ray’s experience was repeatedly my own in academe. Yet reason without soul and service was never my

agenda for becoming a professor. Enduring a meeting with cynical academics is worse than sitting on a hard pew in a fundamentalist chapel. At least in the chapel, someone might show signs of life and say, “Amen.” In fact, my concept of what a university education should be was not shaped in a secular university. Where did I get the idea learning should be focused—not only on knowledge—but, imagination, wisdom, application, service, and students’ lives? The answer became clear on a recent visit to the Messiah College web page: “Our mission is to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation in church and society.”

When seeking refuge in the university, I expected to find Messiah’s mission except for the words *Christian faith* and *church*. I now wonder: Is it possible to develop this vision of higher learning apart from commitment to a particularistic faith? Is it a coincidence that, in the past 20 years, the person most responsible for broadening higher education’s view of scholarship and service—Ernest Boyer—was educated at an evangelical Messiah college?

The exploration that had led me away from my spiritual heritage began to nudge me back to its starting place. For example: I was absolutely certain I could not talk to my father because he was an absolutely certain fundamentalist. At midlife I took a chance. I asked him how he saw my role when I was a child in his church. I began to understand my father for the

first time. I described to him my spiritual journey. I asked him to listen.

He did. It was a gift. We found a bond beyond agreement. One real conversation with the right person—often a parent—can open the door to a myriad of reconciling possibilities.

Nevertheless, even after that pivotal conversation, I did not attend church for ten years. A decade of absence met its end on September 11, 2001.

A First-Time Visit

The horror that gripped the world on September 11 awakened me from my non-dogmatic slumbers. It seemed that Moses stood before the entrance to the twenty-first century with the ancient invitation: “I put before you this day, life and death, blessings and cursing; therefore, chose life that you might live.”

A tide of death choices was sweeping the globe. From what I saw in the academic world, postmodern thinking did not have the strength to deal spiritually with premodern fanaticism. For the first time, my sense of connection with the “God beyond God,” as Paul Tillich put it in *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952, p. 188), began to fail. I needed to hear an unequivocal affirmation of Life.

While reading Karl Barth, Peter Berger, and John Updike for gritty de-

clarations of faith, I discovered Philip Yancey. His youthful response to fundamentalism was as severe as my own. Yancey rejected the church because he “found so little grace there.” He returned because he found grace “nowhere else” (*What’s So Amazing about Grace*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997, p. 16). His discussions of Chesterton and Dillard created for me an unthinkable possibility. I

would visit an evangelical congregation.

On the outside, the church looked like churches back home. As I drove into the parking lot, I felt old fears. *Surely there will be an invitation for “the lost,”* I pondered. *Some brother will put his arm on my shoulder and ask, “Are you saved?” At a minimum, visitors will be directed to stand and*

“Tell how the Lord led you here today?”

None of these fears materialized. The service was well-designed. Each part supported a unifying theme. It was aesthetically refreshing. *What kind of church is this?* I wondered. My ecclesiastical detection map was failing. This church was conservative, probably evangelical, but free of pressure. It was cosmopolitan. All ages were present. Young people seemed eager to be there. The minister (Bowen Matthews, Wilmington, Delaware), was kind and thoughtful. He suggested that a generalized religious consciousness was not sufficient

to support us in the post-September 11 world. We would need to embrace “the sting of particularity.” He was addressing my issues and he made sense.

Comfortable now, I was tempted to shift into a rational analysis. My academic friends would seize the moment to do a cool “ethnography” of the place. A terrible thought. Exactly the kind of detachment I despised.

On the other hand, how could I cope with the anthropomorphic language I was hearing? Shouldn’t disclaimers be made about symbolism and images of a three-storied universe?

At that moment, four hundred people began singing praise songs. One song was from my youth. I had sung it many times, years ago on gospel teams:

He is the mighty King, Master of everything;
His name is Wonderful, Jesus my Lord.

I joined with the singing and tears came to my eyes. All vain fears of anthropomorphism vanished. I recovered something that as Kris Kristofferson sings, I had “lost somehow, somewhere along the way.” (“Sunday Morning Coming Down”). This was my heritage. This belonged to me. It was holy ground.

Since that Sunday morning, I have made numerous first-time visits to old-time places. I am discovering that evangelical writings and worship are emerging as vital centers for faith and reason. In fundamentalism, I saw no place for my mind. In secular domains of academe, I almost lost my soul.

How strange that mind and spirit should now embrace in places where they were initially divided. It is as strange and unexpected as grace.

—Dr. C. Jack Orr is Professor of Communication Studies at West Chester University of Pennsylvania.



The Crazy and Wonderful Power of Song

Joan K. King

When I was a little girl, I remember, I sat in church between my grandparents. I remember their singing. My grandfather was completely tone deaf and my grandmother had a quavering small soprano voice. But how they sang those songs of faith and how they loved to hear others sing.

Now I sing in a congregation that has stood in one place for over three hundred years, surrounded usually by over three hundred other singers. Unlike in my home church, usually we sing without piano or organ, supported only by the strength of the community. The quality of the music is different here from in that church of my childhood, where the organ often overcame the singing. Still the songs are often the same, and my grandparents are never far from my memory or my heart.

I have sung in my current congregation long enough now to hear the voices missing there as well. I miss the young man, his tenor voice silenced by cancer, yet some Sundays his eighty-year-old father's clear tenor sings on, affirming that "all is well" and making

me stop my own singing to listen. I listen to the alto voice behind me, singing alone now for over five years since her dear husband died after being committed all his life to singing in this space. When they used to sing together, their voices would meet, then part, as their harmonies drew close and diverged.

I have watched us come together at the death of a child, faces drawn in pain. In those contexts the song is faint at first; those words of comfort and assurance ring false at first. But somehow in those times the songs sung long before we gathered here reach out across the generations and grab hold of us. You can hear it happening in the crescendo of the music, as the parts begin to clear, the bass line is heard, and slowly but surely that affirmation of faith becomes just that, an affirmation.

Never was the power of the singing as clear to me as the Sunday following September 11. When I stood to lead worship that morning, I looked out over faces filled with images of the week, of pain, of shock, of confusion. As a peace church we brought a set of questions to that Sunday morning that were particularly painful. What did it mean to follow Jesus' way of peace in the face of a faceless enemy? How would we love the "other" when the other seems barely human? As we stood to sing, I sensed the ocean of

emotion among us. Then the song began: *Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, help me stand, I am tired, I am weak, I am worn; through the storm, through the night, lead me on to the light. Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.* With each phrase more tears fell; with each phrase the song swelled, until finally it rang from the walls.

Did the singing change the world? Sometimes I wonder. What I know is that it brought those of us gathered there back to the place we needed to be, back to the place of struggle, back to stand before the face of God.

In her book *Tender Mercies*, author Anne Lamott talks

about visiting a church in San Francisco and of the "singing splitting her wide open." When I sit in this place hallowed by thousands of Sundays of singing, surrounded by people as different from me as night from day—yet hearing what music we make together—I marvel at the wonder and the breadth of God's grace.

Something magical happens in the middle of a song when you look down at the credit line and realize it was written in 1869, or in 1789, or even before, yet here you are in the middle of postmodern America finding God in the same words, the same harmonies in which God was present one hundred, two hundred, even three hundred or more years ago.

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Some Sundays I arrive at church harried and frazzled from the life I lead, sometimes not even liking my daughters or my husband much depending on what the morning at home has brought. Then the singing begins *Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me*. Somehow the conflict over the outfit for Sunday morning or who will clean up the kitchen slides into its proper perspective, shoulders relax, and the Spirit flows down the aisle of our family. I suspect many Sundays this experience is repeated bench after bench.

What is it about this simple act that has such power?

Singing, I think, connects us in new ways; it is a powerful metaphor of community with power to create new realities for us.

Singing connects us again and again to the past and, in the act of singing with our children or others younger than us, to the future. When I sing and hear, if only now in memory or through elderly voices that remind me of them, the voices of my grandparents next to me, all they were and gave to me comes near. When I extend that connection to others of faith who went before me, and realize they sang through times as frightening as whatever I might be facing yet still sang on, I gain courage from that connection.

Mennonites talk all the time about community. We believe Scripture is interpreted in the context of

the community, that authentic faith can only be lived in community, and that Jesus truly stands among us when we are gathered. We are at least as flawed and fraught with conflict as any other group of people. But our singing gives us hope. It is in the discord that the harmony is fully heard. It is only when we all sing the part written for us that the music is fully expressed. It is only when we are all paying attention to the song leader that subtle changes in dynamics can be expressed by hundreds of singers.

This crazy and sometimes wonderful culture we live in doesn't often express the priorities we find in the gospel story. During the week we don't hear much about the power of the powerless, the face of God reflected in the oppressed and downtrodden of our society, or the fact that God might be present in unexpected ways and circumstances. But try to sing through a Sunday morning without being confronted with that reality, if not in the music then in the fact that, amid the difficulties faced by those on all sides, still the singing soars.

—*Joan K. King, Telford, Pennsylvania, manages her own therapy practice in Paoli and Telford. She provides clinical consultation to community programs for persons with mental illness. An avid storyteller, she is mother of three nearly adult daughters.*

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Sentimental Faith versus the God Who Is “I Am”

Luanne Austin

- *Salem Lutheran Church Celebrates Bicentennial.*
- *Smith Creek Regular Baptist Church Observes 250th Anniversary.*
- *Lindale Mennonite Church Hits 100th Birthday.*

As religion editor/reporter for the *Daily News-Record* in Harrisonburg, Virginia, researching and writing about church histories and the religious past of the Shenandoah Valley is part of my job. Most of the Valley's oldest congregations were started by first- or second-generation Europeans who migrated here by way of Pennsylvania.

Though the British Empire's long arm did extend this far, Anglicans had less motivation to venture west of the Blue Ridge Mountains than their freedom-seeking brethren. Thus those who sought such liberty—the Anabaptists, the Quakers, the Lutherans, the Presbyterians—were not much bothered by the edicts imposed on the New World by the Church of England.

After reading of the Valley's early settlers—how they left home for the unknown to live according to



their consciences, learned the hard way that their Indian neighbors were not to be pushed around, broke their backs clearing virgin land for gardens and houses and cattle—I found it easy to idealize their courage and faith.

And I wonder, as the religious persecution eased, as the wilderness was tamed, and as the settlers began aging, if these early pioneers themselves became tame, complacent, with only their memories to remind them of the adventures they once lived walking hand in hand with God. For a people or a person who can point to a collective or personal past in which God has been real and faithful and miracle-working, it is so tempting, once life has settled down, to slide into a backward-looking religion. A religion based on a miraculous experience or revelation or blessed time that is now in the past.

A sentimental faith.

Sentimental faith dwells on what God did yesterday. I am still moved at the mercy of God that forgave my youthful crimes against him, my loved ones, friends, enemies, and strangers. I weep at the great things he has done. And I sometimes long for yesterday, when all my troubles seemed so far away because he was so present.

Yesterday, for me, was the streets of New York City suburbs. I came to Christ raw, untrained in the ways of religion. I knew how to divide a

pound of pot into ounce-size bags for sale, could shoplift an elephant, and used the “F” word twice in each sentence. I harbored much bitterness, was always lonely, and could not cry. I subjected my body to drug abuse,

promiscuous sex, and sleep deprivation.

The night I met Christ, it all came pouring out—all the pain, all the hatred, all the sadness. For the first time in my life, I felt loved and forgiven and clean. The next few years were filled with daily miracles of deliverance, providence, and revelation.

I slept, ate, learned, played, cried, lived with Jesus. He made me into a much better version of me than I was ever capable of. The culmination of all this was my move from New York to the Shenandoah Valley, where just about everyone (or so it seemed) was a Christian. Life was so different; God had called me out to a new place. His presence was so with me all the time.

Then I learned about Christianity as a religion; I became involved with church; I settled into a life routine. Now I, like the religious people all around me, became complacent.

When our faith is of the sentimental sort, we “pray on yesterday’s faith” (to use musician Ben Arthur’s play on

Sentimental faith dwells on what God did yesterday. I am still moved at the mercy of God that forgave my youthful crimes. . . . I weep at the great things he has done. And I sometimes long for yesterday, when all my troubles seemed so far away because he was so present.

words), but without yesterday’s results.

Yesterday’s faith was for yesterday’s challenges. When my faith is based on yesterday or last year or last decade, I am off the hook for today. It may be an act of the subconscious to keep me from dealing with the deeper issues of transformation and sanctification that surface as I “mature.” The obstacles that confront me today, from without and within, cannot be faced with yesterday’s faith.

Recalling the miracles of the past and the things he’s brought me through is futile unless the memories are incentives to believe that God is still interested in me, still active in my life, still working out his plan for me, today.

God made this clear to the Israelites when they wandered through the wilderness after their sensational exit from Egypt. He gave them fresh food every day, calling it “manna.” His people were to gather it from the ground every morning. If they stored some for the next day, it rotted. They had to depend on God to be “I am” every day.

God provided the manna yesterday and the day before that. That gave them reason to believe he would do it again today. Yesterday’s manna was for yesterday. Like the Israelites, I must gather it afresh each day.

On a larger scale, denominations, ministries, and spiritual movements often operate on yesterday’s faith, losing their relevance as the world changes or as the adherents age. We see this in the many churches attended by only the elderly. The

church members point back with a sentimental feeling to a time when it all meant so much. So let’s keep doing it that way.

In my interviews with these folks, the name of Jesus rarely comes up. They’ll talk about former ministers, building programs and the church member who made the pulpit, but they don’t say anything about God, his faithfulness, his saving grace, his love.

This type of church is often unequipped to help members who face personal difficulties, because while it holds the form of religion, the supernatural power is gone. Many denominations were founded on a revelation that over time has become overdeveloped theologically and experientially, in preaching and in practice, while other relevant truths are ignored. In this case, sentimentality fosters an obsessive devotion to the founders, long dead, and their idolized precepts.

God is not a yesterday kind of guy. God is not an old man (or woman). God is always now, forever.

Sentimental faith is often accompanied by someday faith.

When we hear God’s voice today, telling us to apologize to our spouse or send \$200 to a missionary or tell the truth or quit work to raise our children—to trust God in some way today—but we dismiss it or put it off or flatly refuse, then we risk losing the ability to hear him.

We think, “Tomorrow I will be stronger in my faith” or “It can wait” or “God understands I can’t do it because of my weakness, which I will

eventually overcome.” Someday, we think, my faith will be like yesterday.

“Today,” he says over and over in Hebrews 3 and 4, “when you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.” Doing so, he says, will result in “an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.”

Leaving us with an empty shell of an old religion.

God does not reveal himself to us as “I was,” or “I will be.” God is “I am.”

And we are, too.

—*Luanne Austin, Harrisonburg, Virginia, is a religion reporter for the Harrisonburg Daily News Record. Her column, “Rural Pen,” appears in the paper each Friday.*

Family Photo

This couple, the ones with the gray hair and lines in their smiles, were once alone. Remember their wedding photo, such smooth cheeks too young to know what they did. Now they have grown to many, their children already showing signs of wear, and the grandchildren making faces to tease the cool photographer. This clustering in families, how does it come, circles moving out from a dropped stone, going on to infinity and starting again. There must be an answer in this particular family, but all the expressions, in spite of their dear demeanor, keep the secret behind converged eyes.

—*Barbara Esch Shisler*

The Descendant of the Man Who Built a Chair for Jesus

Gregory Hartzler-Miller

The *DreamSeeker Magazine* discussion (spring 2002) about whether or not we can hear God’s voice has provided an occasion for reexamining my own sense of call. I don’t have St. Paul’s strength of character, but like Paul in his weakness, I know a man in Christ—seven years ago this man heard inexpressible things and was caught up into paradise.

The ascent of the soul to heaven is a perennial story, and one which sometimes comes across as prideful. So I’ll begin by emphasizing my grief and disorientation seven years ago. In marriage, church and career, the main spheres of my social life, I was feeling powerless.

Though my wife and I wanted children, we were infertile. High tech medical treatments soon became oppressive. Though chances to adopt came our way, and I had visions of the joys of adoptive parenting, we decided that adoption was not for us. I felt anxious about a childless future.

Several times during sermons at our Mennonite church I’d walked out. The congregation was laboring

over whether to bless partners in same-sex covenants. Is it sinful flesh that drives the desire for gay and lesbian sexual union? Can we judge another person's fleshly sin or spiritual longing without, in so doing, judging ourselves? Such questions became the sub-text for every sermon, or so it seemed to me. During these public monologues, my own struggles of flesh and spirit sometimes became overwhelming. Sitting passively, I felt crippled. Walking out seemed, for me, more joyful. But, for others, my behavior was disruptive.

I'd left my last social work job after only a few months. I had been accompanying a person with mental retardation and autism during such daily activities as working on a shop assembly line, aerobic walking in the park, and playing educational computer games. My title was "community integration specialist." One day my boss reassigned me within the agency. I left her office in tears. I hadn't seen it coming. When I gained my composure, I returned to ask why. She said that I didn't seem happy. I agreed, but I thought I'd hidden it.

Years earlier, while working toward credentials in social work and theology, I had been reasonably successful at mastering concepts and imitating mentors. But my disorderliness at

church, my unhappiness on the job, and the evaporation of my parenting dreams became an occasion for serious self-doubt.

The maxim "Follow your bliss" was popular those days. And during a solo drive from Elkhart, Indiana, to Harrisonburg, Virginia, I caught a hint of mine. I made a side trip to Holmes County, Ohio, because I'd been reading about my ancestor who lived there six generations ago.

As a young man in 1809, Jonas "White" Stutzman was the first of European stock to build a cabin and settle in Holmes County. He married, helped raise a family, and served his community as a school-

teacher. But in his later years, he became, as some Amish observers say, "a little unusual."

At the Mennonite information center in Berlin, I was stunned when I saw on display a somewhat oversized wooden chair that Jonas had built. It had acquired a surreal quality because, according to local lore, he declared it a "chair for Jesus." The tour guide explained that Jonas, a Millennial enthusiast, mistakenly set an 1853 date for the second coming. And in his later years, he wore all white, including, some say, hat and shoes. Thus his nickname, *Der Weiss*.

Being in his bloodline, and knowing some of my own tendencies to-

As a young man in 1809, Jonas "White" Stutzman was the first of European stock to build a cabin and settle in Holmes County. . . . But in his later years, he became, as some Amish observers say, "a little unusual." . . . Being in his bloodline, and knowing some of my own tendencies toward eccentricity, his story drew me in.

ward eccentricity, his story drew me in. I wondered what experiences might have moved him to act as he did. And I had a hunch that understanding him might somehow help me avoid unwitting imitation.

According to Jonas's own writings, he was influenced by personal raptures, or more specifically, imaginative visions received during rapture. Beyond the mundane world he saw a cosmic battle between God and the devil. He became convinced that, by outward signs, he could clearly distinguish between the sinful ways of the flesh and the path of the spirit: Checkers and stripes and bright color wearing, tobacco using, dancing, and frolicking were outward signs of carnality; those sincerely preparing for the great banquet of Christ should, as he saw it, wear white and earth tones, gray and fallow, the colors of sheep and eagles.

As through rapture he judged outward signs of flesh and spirit, so also he discerned the before and after of Christ's return. For Jonas, the 50 in 1850 came to represent a pivotal jubilee year. During the next three-and-a-half years, like a modern Noah, he would call all people to prepare for the day of judgment. Then, on the sixth month of the fifty-third year, 1853, the change would take place.

Of course, nobody knows the day or the hour, so he left a little wiggle room. Sometime at the end of May or the beginning of June, the sun, he said, would set at noon and not come up for 30 days. Then a new sun was to rise and shine seven times brighter than the old sun. Thus the symbolic

flourish of his apocalyptic hope was pinned down on the hard empirical measure of the calendar.

Although his literal interpretations of those visions led him on a path that might seem, in retrospect, comical, his writings suggest that something transformative was actually happening in his soul. In his words, he was becoming a tabernacle for the love-essence of God. While I find his use of male dominant language jarring when I quote it, I understand it in the context of his time. And I find some of his other old time language endearing. He wrote,

"It [regeneration] is a consummate change of the entire man, for though it has its beginning in the most spiritual part of man, to wit: his will or volition, it nevertheless penetrates gradually all the faculties of man, as well of the soul as of the body, until the whole man becomes thoroughly permeated, purified, sanctified, healed by the love-essence of God, and is thus gained and conquered by and for God te-totally. The man becomes a tabernacle of God, and his heart a temple in which the Eternal & Unspeakable One reveals himself with inexpressible love and gives him to taste such divine joys and enjoyments of the nature and existence of the natural man has not even a glimpse, much less any knowledge thereof. For Christ tells us: 'The Kingdom of God is within you!'"

Here instead of dress code, he speaks of indwelling Spirit, and rather than grasping for protection from the devil, he uses the language of mystical awe—"the unspeakable one" revealed

through “inexpressible love. . . .” His enthusiasm is perhaps manic and he overplays the experiential side of regeneration; nevertheless, I liked meditating on his words. If he’d been preaching to my face, I might have felt very uncomfortable, but with 150 years between us, it seemed safe to suspend skepticism and listen to his testimony. I spent hours outlining what he said about regeneration and the kingdom of God. Of course, I also reflected on his scriptural sources.

It was around that time, seven years ago, that I came to “know a man in Christ.” One night in a dream, this man heard a heavenly voice mirroring a very earthly life question: “Why am I in this place, at this time?” After an expectant pause he heard inexpressible words, words a human being cannot repeat with anywhere near the same effect. He was bowled over with a heartfelt sense of utter separation from God and, at the same time, compassion for people in misery.

Awakening abruptly from sleep, unable to catch his breath, he suddenly heard a rushing sound like wind and his whole body seemed to burst into invisible flame. He assumed he was dying, and that terrified him. But as his soul ascended with a pure release of pleasure more intense than anything he could have imagined, he accepted death. The pleasure quickly faded and all that remained was men-

tal awareness rising as if lifted by a gentle breeze. Then, like a candle that goes out, all thought ceased.

During what he remembers as a distinct gap in consciousness, a perceptual void, a luminous darkness, the merciful goodness of God was secretly at work, that is, judging by the transformation that came next—he was reborn in paradise, thoroughly permeated, purified, sanctified, and healed by the love-essence of God (No, he wasn’t under the influence of drugs, a seizure disorder, or any known health problem).

To say that man in Christ is me sounds foolish. Those who know me will attest that I’m weak. In an extended family gathering recently, when the other men were obviously enjoying fatherhood, I became oddly sleepy, then irrepressibly weepy. Recently, among Mennonites, I walked out on yet another sermon then awkwardly attempted to explain and apologize. And it still appears I’m not well suited for a mainstream career.

Yet in the past seven years I’ve begun to discover a path that suits me. I’ve come to appreciate one of John of the Cross’s basic admonitions: relinquish the voices and visions received in rapture; cling to no experience, however pleasurable, nor to any voice however sublime, nor any vision however heavenly. Though flights of the spirit sometimes mark a “spiritual betrothal,” they are not the termination

In the past seven years I’ve begun to discover a path that suits me. I’ve come to appreciate one of John of the Cross’s basic admonitions: relinquish the voices and visions received in rapture

of life’s journey. John counsels a walk of simple faith, a habitual trust that the light of God is at work secretly in our ordinary lives. Jonas might have benefited from such guidance.

My emerging way of life resembles that of a contemplative monk or a hermit. My main household chore is meal preparation and clean-up. During the better part of my days I turn to solitary spiritual disciplines. But unlike the monks in the rural wilderness, my wilderness is in the city. Instead of open landscape, when I open our front door I see a deserted house, vacant since before we moved here three years ago.

Contemplative attentiveness enables a particular quality of neighboring, a responsiveness to those who come near. It might include taking glasses of water to the garbage collectors on a hot day, or walking to the mini-park with neighbor children and picking up trash while they climb and swing, or watching cats for the woman across the street who comes back from a blissful vacation and introduces a woman friend as her partner. Contemplative neighboring is listening, welcoming, and often, at the end of the day, having an interesting story to share.

As I accepted childlessness, I more often noticed the spiritual friendship dimension of my marriage, my life partnership. My focus shifted from

procreation to those intangible qualities of intimacy that make living together joyful: respect for the other, attentive listening, self-control, finding words to share what is important, integrity, attentive silence, affirmation of our separate spheres. In such shared events as sipping tea by our vegetable garden or meditative Scripture reading in the living room, we create space for seeing beauty.

To sum up, unlike my ancestor Jonas, I interpret rapture as a “via negativa,” a path to soulful transformation through mystical unknowing. But like him, I offer in writing my testimony of God’s extraordinary grace. Relinquishing life visions that weren’t working, I’m married less anxiously now, aiming to become skillful at contemplative solitude, urban neighboring, and spiritual friendship.

Thanks for listening. May the peace of Christ dwell in your hearts.

—*Gregory Hartzler-Miller, Baltimore, studied Christian spirituality at Washington Theological Union in D. C. His article, “Jonas Stutzmann: The Amish Man Who Wore All White and Built a Chair for Jesus,” is a chapter in Apocalypticism and Millennialism: Shaping a Believers Church Eschatology for the Twenty-First Century, edited by Loren L. Johns (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora Press, 2000).*



The Scab

Joe Franzen

Have you ever had a cut that wouldn't heal? A scab that just hung around? You might forget about it for awhile but eventually you bump it, or pick it, causing it to bleed and reopen.

I've had a wound like that for five years. As I approached the weekend of the fifth anniversary, I had forgotten what weekend it was and was treating it like any other. Then a person reminded me, and the scab came right off. I was kind of stunned at how the blood flowed slowly at first, but then, as more people poked and prodded, became a steady flow, until this wound became all I could think of. That happens every year around anniversary time.

On August 12, 1997, I was at the Audubon ecology camp in Maine. It was a Tuesday. Earlier that day my parents and brother had put me on a plane at the Philadelphia airport. At the camp I met up with a buddy I had gotten to know the year before. I began to envision how the week would turn out. Sometimes, looking back, I first think it was at lunch but then, remembering on, I recall more clearly that no, they caught up with me in the morning.

So yes, it was morning when one of the counselors, a family friend, pulled me outside the mess hall and told me bluntly that there had been a family emer-

gency. I needed to leave. They had all my stuff ready to go, took me on a boat to the mainland, and sped me to the closest airport.

There my uncle was waiting in the lobby. I had thought of everything that could have happened: A car crash. My brother had run away. Our dog had died. Divorce. Not once did what really happen cross my mind. But then my uncle told me that my father had killed himself. What I couldn't think of, what I couldn't have imagined, became a dark and twisted reality.

That is when my cut first was opened. It was a bleeder, all right, and I probably should have gotten stitches or at least some gauze, but there was none around. I must have lost a lot of blood, because during the time right after and for at least a few weeks, I felt empty and drained, devoid of anything that would support me mentally as my physical shell remained standing but only as a vessel for a waning light.

A pilot had offered his service to my family when he had heard I was up in Maine during that time. I flew the three hours back in a two-seater Cessna, holding back tears which came from a bottomless well and pretending to read Stephen King's *It* to show I was all right.

Eventually I got home, or what had once seemed like home. Cars overflowed our three-car-maximum driveway. Relatives, friends, and people I had not seen before filled my

house and engulfed me as I tried to get my bearings. I cried. No, I wept, I yelled, I argued. Eventually when I had nothing left I just laid on my bedroom floor and moaned.

This cut had hurt me more than I could ever have imagined. My legs were chopped out from under me. My heart was beaten and bruised. It hurt

This cut had hurt me more than I could ever have imagined. My legs were chopped out from under me. My heart was beaten and bruised. It hurt to breathe and to move.

to breathe and to move. The pain was so excruciating that remaining totally still was the only way to hold at bay the unbearable badness.

But to move past such an ailment, we must pay attention to it. Gradually I found the little understanding and strength I needed to begin liv-

ing again. After the first weeks the blood congealed, and people each offered their own ointments and specialties in healing the now scabby mess.

Since my dad died, I have had to make many decisions. When your whole world changes dramatically, when everything you held as sacred and secure collapses, you can choose destruction or rebirth. Destruction will always seem easier; it requires no effort and seems to solve the problems. But rebirth, hard though it may be, allows you to choose your new life. You gain a chance to construct a new reality with stronger supports and stability. For the past five years I have tried to shape my new life the best I could. I have learned lessons in love,

pain, and living which some people may never know, and I thank God for them.

Each year the scab grows smaller. It hurts a little less each time I bump it. It still bleeds, but instead of making a mess it offers me compassion. It occasionally hurts, but instead of causing unbearable pain evokes the memories of how it happened. Eventually my cut will become a scar, and that will have its own feelings. For now the scab remains, and tomorrow, August 12, it will surely bleed again.

But as the fact that I'm sharing this the day before suggests, at least this year I'm ready for it.

—Joe Franzen recently graduated from Souderton (Pa.) Area High School and is now a first-year student at Washington and Lee University in Virginia. He shared an oral version of this article at Salford Mennonite Church, his home congregation, on August 11, 2002, the day before the fifth anniversary of the death of his father, Bill Franzen.

Hangin' On

Decrepit and indomitable
they totter from walker to chair
in a clutter of medicine and
equipment for keeping alive.
I carry the scene home
and sleepless at 3 A.M. get a drink
and sit up in bed to listen
to the mockingbird.
Distant but clear, continuous
the notes flow through the night
like a glad, immortal stream.
People kill them for just such singing.
I am 62. I can sit up in bed
all night, drinking tea and listening,
thinking about decrepitude
and indomitability. I can be
what I choose. I can live
like a mockingbird and die
hanging on to every note I've got.

—Barbara Esch Shisler

Lessons from My Father's Lamp

Elizabeth Raid

I tucked him into bed tonight. Curled in fetal position, he looked so small and helpless. The familiar words of a lullaby came naturally, followed by the Twenty Third Psalm. I knew he would want the blanket over his shoulders, so I pulled it up, told him I loved him and kissed him “good-night.”

As I walked from his darkened room to the hallway, I wanted to scream at God: “It’s not fair!” “I’m not supposed to be putting to bed the one who tucked me in when I was a child!”

The scene in the hall stopped me from shouting out loud. Four women holding hands sat in a row of chairs. The nurse in the middle was talking quietly to soothe the fears one woman had of being lost. Ninety-three-year-old Fanny’s hair piled neatly on her head, along with her trim figure dressed in a tailored suit and silk blouse gave her an air of elegance that hardly matched her current state of agitation.

I knew I needed to say something before I would have permission to pass this line up. Despite my inner agitation, I stopped to add words of calmness and comfort to those of the nurse. Not wanting to linger, I muttered something about the rain and my bicycle

getting wet, so I needed to go. The nurse suggested they say a prayer to ask God to take care of them. I knew I was too angry to pray, so I left.

I focused my gaze as I walked toward the elevator. Marie would be waiting for anyone who passed to pay attention. Yesterday I had smiled, told her how beautiful her hair looked, held her hand. Always wordless, her response surprised me. She pulled my hand to her lips and kissed it. I thanked God for the gift of human touch as I gave her a parting blessing.

Today I wanted no contact. My thoughts were with my 89-year-old father, curled up in the narrow nursing home bed. What had happened

to his 40-year association with our church college as professor, registrar, librarian, archivist? The many church boards he had helped start and served on? His interests in history, community, geography, geology, business, writing, study of Scripture and preaching, woodworking, and letter writing?

I pondered these questions as I cycled quickly through the drizzling rain back to Dad's house where I was living. My dark and dampened spirit wondered if I should stop coming to visit every day, if I should separate myself from this painful situation.

As I parked the bicycle inside the garage, I remembered that his students gave him that bicycle when he retired from teaching. I shook the rain off my dark green jacket and laid it out

to dry on the bicycle basket. How I wished I could as easily shake off the sadness of seeing him suffer from Alzheimer's disease!

Inside the house I settled myself at the desk he had made in 1941. My church history books waited and my note pad remained half full of notes as I looked at the rich walnut paneling in his study and the sturdy but shapely turned lamp on the desk.

I studied that lamp. It was still a lamp, though it had occupied that same place for over 30 years. It could be useful, but without someone to turn it on, it could not function as intended. I turned the knob. Soft light filled the room and lingered on my hand as I held it close to the bulb. The warmth began to soften my thoughts of doubt and despair.

One week ago my daughter and her husband brought their seven-week-old daughter to visit. Kate is my first grandchild, so I wanted to introduce, his first great-grandchild, to my father. Every evening for weeks before their visit we looked at her picture. I named her and, knowing Dad's love of family history, told him repeatedly how she was related and how special it was that he is now a great-grandfather. This once articulate man would nod, smile, and say, "Yup" when I asked if he knew they were related.

When the young family arrived near the noon meal, I hustled everyone to see Dad. I knew that after lunch he would take a long nap. He

was in his wheelchair in the lunchroom. His head rested on the table and his hands rubbed his head. Attempts to arouse him failed. He would sit up but continued to keep his eyes shut. Baby Kate slept on too, content with her new surroundings.

We snapped pictures and got oldest and youngest to hold hands while sleeping. I played familiar hymns on the piano and sang as I often did during the evening meal. Dad woke enough to eat with some help, then we snapped more pictures, finally having everyone with open eyes.

Dad may have slept through the meeting, but the four women in a row holding hands looked at baby Kate with wide eyes and bright smiles. Speechless Beth said a complete sentence: "Look at the baby!" Harriet giggled and held Kate's little hand. Francine patted Kate's head.

Too soon my children and granddaughter were gone. It had not been the perfect meeting I had planned. Did Dad know they were there? Had some connection passed from one generation to another when they held hands? I would never know.

I could only give a prayer of thanks that they had met and the three of us who took the pictures could tell the story of their meeting. This drama extended beyond Dad and his great-granddaughter. It was larger than the brief happiness it brought to four Alzheimer's patients on a winter day.

I realized that the stories of our lives can continue even when we no longer are able to remember or understand who we were or what ways we

contributed to the world. The light may appear to be out, but the spirit remains, waiting to be touched and given possibilities to shine, if in a way different from its earlier full strength.

Those of us who remain carry the responsibility to continue to tell the stories, even the painful parts. We also find ourselves called to respond in caring ways to those who no longer can tell their own stories or express their basic needs. Some days are harder than others. At times not seeing others suffer is the easy way out.

But in a world less than perfect, God calls us, I sense amid the shadows of my journey with my father, to extend the hand of love and care to those who suffer in ways and for reasons we will never understand. We can give thanks for the rich, full lives they lived and the many people they influenced. We can tell them they are lovely and loved by God—just as they are now. When we gently touch, hold a hand, breath a prayer, sing a favorite hymn, read a psalm, whistle, draw a picture, we are the presence of God for them.

When I am honest about my feelings of loss and anger, I allow God to give me deeper compassion and love. Then I too am blessed as those experiencing diminishment add grace and light to my life. Both of us can light the lamp. However it is lit, it brightens and warm a cold world, even if only for a few moments.

—Elizabeth Raid, Newton, Kansas, recently completed seminary studies. She is Resource Development Coordinator for Mennonite Central Committee, Central States.

My thoughts were with my 89-year-old father, curled up in the narrow nursing home bed. What had happened to his 40-year association with our church college as professor, registrar, librarian, archivist?

So What's Wrong with "Doing What's Best for the Kids"?

Valerie Weaver-Zercher

I've often felt pity for children who race from school to soccer practice to violin lessons, then home for a quick freezer dinner, homework, and bed. Thankfully, in recent years the media has begun emphasizing the importance of "down time" for kids, when they can catch ants and stare at tree roots, and some suburban parents are organizing themselves to defy the tyranny of athletic practices and scheduled activities.

When hearing these reports, I've felt grateful for my own unscheduled childhood hours of making acorn soup and tunneling through piles of leaves in our backyard. I've also felt proud of our urban neighborhood, where families seem to spend lots of unscheduled time together, braiding hair on the front porch or grilling out back.

So I was chagrined to realize recently how susceptible I am to the same impulse that drives parents to overschedule their kids. Obviously raising an 18-month-old doesn't make my drivenness take the form of classes and homework (although if there were classes on "Flying Biplanes For Toddlers" or "Bulldoz-

ing For the Very Short," my son would be there, with or without my consent). My parental perfectionism is surfacing in a more—at least seemingly—benign form: *He should always have "what's best."*

I hadn't named it as such until I began tallying up my hopes for him—which, of course, soon turned into a list of the ways I daily "fail" him. He should have a big backyard with a stream and woods so he has easy access to the natural world, but the yard shouldn't be so big we don't have neighbors his age close by.

Speaking of friends, he should have playmates from a variety of racial, ethnic, religious, and class backgrounds so he becomes comfortable relating to people different from himself. But he should also have enough friends with pacifist parents who believe in timeouts rather than spanking, the Narnia series rather than Pokemon, and organic zucchini casserole rather than hot dogs and cheese curls.

And he should go to city public schools because too many white middle-class folks like us have abandoned them, but of course he should also go to private schools—preferably small Mennonite ones like I did—so he is challenged intellectually and gains a sense of peoplehood and identity.

He should have enough toys that he doesn't grow up feeling deprived, but not so many he learns a sense of entitlement. He should spend a significant portion of his childhood in another country so he can learn an-

other language and culture, but he should also live down the street from his grandparents.

You begin to see my dilemma.

So when did my love for my child turn into a grocery list of my own perfectionism? When did I get caught in this catch-22 of socially conscious but middle-class parenthood? In short,

When did my love for my child turn into a grocery list of my own perfectionism? When did I get caught in this catch-22 of socially conscious but middle-class parenthood?

when did I become one of those moms in minivan or SUV commercials?

I'm not sure when or how, but it's a comfort to know I'm not the only one facing the dilemma. In recent conversation with a friend who lives on a farm, I said I was

afraid my son would become one of those city kids who doesn't know where milk comes from. She told me fears the opposite: that her daughters will become "country hicks." "I want them to have all the [positive] experiences I had as a child—and all the ones I didn't," she said simply.

Exactly. It sounds benign enough: I mean, who can argue with wanting your children to have the best experiences possible? What parent doesn't?

Perhaps it comes down to one's definitions of "best." I'm beginning to think that I, and many parents, have been hoodwinked by false notions of what's best for our children, so we won't consider ourselves to be adequate parents until . . . (fill in the blank with your own neuroses).

I'm not sure who's done the trickery. Advertisers, who survey and spy

on us until they convince us to buy every Little Kitty and Bob the Builder trinket? Our own psyches, stirring an odd alchemy of love and ambition for these little folks into a nagging sense that we're not doing right by them? A competitive nature, threatened by the fact that another's child might have richer experiences than ours? A religious upbringing and cultural milieu that tend to emphasize the contradictory—or at least paradoxical—goals of simplicity and “taste,” identification with the poor and higher education, peoplehood and diversity?

No matter who is responsible, I and other parents are left to figure out workable definitions of what's best for our children. Can what's best include limits and deficiencies and even conscious choices to have less than everything we want for them? Can it mean having enough instead of having it all?

Judging from my contradictory hopes, it will have to. And sometimes I find comfort in smallness, limits, and decisions for less. Sometimes I know in my gut that raising a happy and healthy child has little to do with yard or school, friends or toys, and has much to do with kisses and affirmations and bedtime prayers.

So perhaps the question becomes this: *Can I be at peace with my children having “enough”?*

The day I'm hoping to finish this column, the mail brings a glossy catalogue. Its products, it claims, will give my child “higher scores in school, a competitive edge in the real world, career advantages in our global economy, and a world of personal fulfillment.”

All this for thatdiaper-bottomed toddler currently experimenting with how toilet paper tastes?

I've learned to toss most such catalogues in the trash—decorating my child's room in Pottery Barn paraphernalia just doesn't make it onto my to-do list (or my budget). But this catalogue is selling something I could fall for: videos and tapes that teach your child a second language. A gushing mother testifies: “My daughter, who is now 21 months old . . . has better pronunciation than I do. And I took five years of French!”

Three months older than Sam, I calculate. I feel that familiar, creeping dread that I'm failing if my son can't conjugate German verbs by the time he's three. I thought I was immune to this pressure by now; after all, I've spent this whole essay analyzing it. I know they're preying on exactly this sense of inadequacy, counting on it to move through my body, toward my hand, and out into my checkbook.

But analyzing something doesn't equal freedom from its power, I'm learning. At least for now, however, my checkbook stays in its place.

This small step doesn't deliver me from perfectionist motherhood. Yet in these vulnerable days of early parenthood, any step away from feelings of inadequacy and toward trust and confidence feels like victory.

—*Valerie Weaver-Zercher, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, is the mother of a toddler son she is not trying to nudge toward perfection as well as assistant editor and columnist for DreamSeeker Magazine.*

“Signs” and Wonders

Dave Greiser

By now readers of this column know that I am a fan of filmmakers who are preoccupied with two things: the meaning of life, and the possibility that there is more to life than meets the eye.

With his fourth major film release in five years, M. Night Shyamalan is accumulating a body of work that addresses both kinds of issues from an intriguing array of angles. Shyamalan, now 31, was raised by Hindu parents who sent him to Christian private schools. Possibly due to his bicultural exposure, his films explore spiritual themes with the kind of tolerance and gentleness characteristic of his parents' faith and at the same time the rational precision of much Christian theology.

Shyamalan's first commercial film, “Wide Awake” (1998), dealt with the quest of a 10-year-old boy, after his beloved grandfather's death, to learn the fate of the spirits of the dead. “The Sixth Sense” (1999) was ostensibly about life after death, though its true subject may have been ghosts. Its mood was more sinister and its plot more complex than “Wide Awake.” Next “Unbreakable” (2000) raised the possibility of the existence of an invincible human being in this life.

All three films eschew flashy special effects, relying instead on well-crafted mystery, deft plot twists, and misdirection, and psychological tension between characters to build tension and suspense as the stories move toward resolution. Shyamalan credits Alfred Hitchcock as a major influence in his artistic vision, and all the above could be said of Hitchcock's work as well.

"Signs" is in the same well-crafted mold as its predecessors. It tells the story of the family of Graham Hess (Mel Gibson), a

farmer and one time Episcopal priest who has left the church after a faith-shaking personal tragedy. For those who have not seen the film, I will not reveal the nature of that tragedy, searing though it is.

From the opening shot it is evident that something odd is happening on the Hess farm. There are noises on the wind, dogs barking at nothing, and footsteps on the roofs of barn and house. An old baby monitor picks up what sounds like a conversation in an unknown language. Then there are the unexplained cornfield circles. When CNN broadcasts nervous reports of similar sightings around the world, Graham's two children (Abigail Breslin and Rory Culkin) and younger brother (Joaquin Phoenix) are convinced it is the work of aliens.

The rest of "Signs" moves deftly between a growing worldwide panic over the imminent alien invasion and Father Hess' own loss of faith in God.

Shyamalan trusts his characters and the script enough to allow his story to unfold slowly, in long scenes filled with literally dreadful silences and fearful facial expressions.

Shyamalan's films explore spiritual themes with the kind of tolerance and gentleness characteristic of his parents' faith and at the same time also the rational precision of much Christian theology.

Those who have seen the earlier films know that the director rewards patience and alert attention to detail. By the conclusion of the film, it seems that nearly every word and action has been essential to the tightly (too tightly?) crafted narrative, the pur-

pose of which, in part, is the resolution of a priest's crisis of faith.

Rather than reveal the ending, let me simply observe that it tries to supply an answer to the old theological quandary about God's sovereignty and human free will. "Are you a miracle man?" Father Hess asks his brother as they watch the evening news. "Or do you think we're all just on our own?"

Whether the film resolves the dilemma, adds to the ongoing debate, or misses the boat altogether I leave to the viewer. "Signs," like good literature, stands up well under multiple viewings.

—*Dave Greiser keeps his own feet firmly planted on the soil of Souderton, Pennsylvania. He is on the pastoral team at Souderton Mennonite Church and teaches preaching part-time at Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Philadelphia.*

It All Ends

Michael A. King

It all ends. From one angle, I've always known that. As a missionary kid I was shuttled from country to country, from ending to ending of one home and then another. By my teens I had learned that amid clinical depression my grandfather had ended his life, a legacy which, as any family therapist will confirm, has its effects on our family to this day.

So the realization that it all ends has accompanied me as long as I can remember, and I couldn't count the times I've drawn on it preaching and writing or to spin for my family and friends far more doomsday scenarios, I'm sure, than they ever really wanted to hear.

I thought, then—and perhaps this is one reason I so often pondered and spoke of it—that as I grew older I would find endings less painful than most people. I would already have faced and worked through the reality that to say it all ends is to include the fact that my life will end.

That approach has in fact worked in one area: having gone bald at 15, I do find myself feeling a certain carefree sense of having been there, done that, when my peers begin to lose their hair. But the end of hair, it turns out, is not the same as the end of life. And so it has come as something of a shock to me, as I draw ever nearer to 50, that I am after all just a plain old normal

human being, one more person not exempted from times of fear and sadness as I see that the hourglass of my life is fuller on the lower half than the upper and that the sand is trickling ever more quickly into the bottom.

One way I've tried to cope with this is to keep lengthening my life expectancy. I've always felt comforted by the possibility that I might still have at least half of my life left, and even now I like to think so. However, the fact that from this point forward I'll have to live

nearly to 100 to be only halfway through concerns me—though it did relieve me recently to note that the oldest woman in Massachusetts is 112. This means maybe I can get there too and leaves me with oodles of time.

Or very little, since how true it is that none of us know the day or the hour when it all will end for us or the world. And how true as well that the odds of my living for endless decades are inexorably turning against me.

At the Edge of My Own Ending

But a few weeks ago I had an experience that somehow both deepened and lightened the fear. I had a dream that went on forever through strange plot twists it would bore even me to recount, and I never did figure out what the plot had to do with the feeling I had when I awoke, so let the plot be the chaff and the feeling the wheat. The feeling was this: finally I had re-

ally and truly stood by the edge of the abyss. Finally it had sunk in, into my bones (which will turn brittle) and into my flesh (which is, as Scripture says, like grass), and not only into my theorizing brain, that it all ends. Finally I truly believed in my own death.

On the one hand, I still couldn't believe it—how can any of us? Don't we all go through life startled each time to realize what has happened to us? Don't we each, as we enter every new life stage, think that it can't be, that we who were a baby are now seven and nearly grown up (I remember thinking exactly that); or 15 and know everything when just last year we were so dumb; or 21 with the whole grand vista of life just starting to spread out before us when once we thought 21 so impossibly distant; or parents gazing at that first baby, puzzled that no one has ever before quite grasped the magic of a newborn child; or 30 and trying to figure out how we became the age we once said couldn't be trusted?

Or beyond, when it really gets scary, to 40 or 50 or 60 (I don't dare look much farther yet, but I know some of you are already there), startled that our children really do think we're old (but our job is to be children thinking our parents are old—when did it turn around!), watching our flesh wither ever more like grass in drought, trying to understand how we can be so old when so much of us is still so young?

Finally it had sunk in, into my bones (which will turn brittle) and into my flesh (which is, as Scripture says, like grass), and not only into my theorizing brain, that it all ends.

So I couldn't believe it, and yet also, after waking from that dream, I could. I could believe that I would die. Part of me, if I dare put it that way, was scared to death. I pictured life up to the point of death as solid earth, the solid living reality I have known since birth, and death as a great chasm. Suddenly you get to the edge of the world, as in the days when people thought the earth was flat, and there is nothing there. It just drops off and down forever, and who would not be frightened to fall into that.

I do have faith. I believe that in some way beyond my and our full knowing as we now gaze only dimly at what eludes our understanding, who we are does not just fall off that edge but into God's spirit and lives on.

But I don't *know* that. None of us can know it in the same way as we know we are alive in this life. Maybe despite lack of proof some *are* sure what happens after they reach that edge, and if so, maybe that is a gift.

But I'm not sure. I've shaped my life according to the faith that when I reach the edge God won't let me fall entirely in, but still, at least as I see it now, if I am conscious as I draw my final breaths I won't be sure what's next until I enter it. *I will* die, that is clear. But only then will I fully learn to what extent my faith was sound—or, if there is nothing after the edge, I may fall into death too fast even to find out how wrong I have been.

Confronting such realities was a wrenching thing. I suspect I will stand at the same edge and at times feel even more afraid of that drop into forever as I journey ever closer toward it.

But the odd thing—and here I am reminded of the gospel story and of how often in it things turn upside-down, most notably of course in what happens to Jesus after he falls off the edge—is how much joy also surged in after I stood at the edge. Because if my life and everything in it will end, truly and really, then how dear is every last remaining bit of it before it all slips from me. And how much I want not to waste it on useless things but on what I would want to cherish if I knew, say (and I realize some actually face this and can speak to this more reliably than I), that I had just months or weeks left before arriving at that edge.

A major part of what I want to cherish in the time left is what most people testify to when they realize life won't go on forever: friends, family, loved ones. I could go on at length about that. But this time that doesn't seem what's calling for expression. Again and again in recent weeks I've been drawn to two large things worth cherishing: the earth itself, and the people in it.

At the Edge of the Earth's Ending

The beginning of acceptance that I will die has made me only more ready to believe that if I can die, so too, huge as it is, can our very planet. In 1988, the year in which a dreadfully hot and dry U.S. summer first brought global warming to popular attention, I had another dream. In it I was for some reason carried up in a helicopter, and from it I caught one last glimpse of waves crashing on the rocks of Maine and cliffs of Oregon,

snow comforting the Rocky Mountains, wind rippling across the wheat-fields of the world's breadbasket, sun setting on Manhattan's towers and then the Golden Gate Bridge.

But it was all about to fall apart. I don't remember actual images of disaster. I simply knew America was dying and that I was seeing its beauty one last time before the end. In the background there was, of all things, a sound track, sounding thin and scratchy as if coming from an old 78 rpm record. It was a rendition of "God Bless America," but it was no longer what it had been—a hymn to America's greatness. Now it was a lament, an echo of those sitting by the waters of Babylon and weeping as they mourned their own exile so long ago. Then it became a plea, a plea to God to forget the times we sang it as a blessing on tyranny and hear it at last as humble prayer for help.

The paradox is this: what I find to be true in confronting the inevitability of my own death I also find to be true in facing the possibility of the earth's death: if it really can die, then how much more do I love it. If it really is possible (and already we see it happening all around if we have eyes to see) that so much of what once seemed never-ending—the woods and pastures and blue blue skies, the snows of winter down here and not just at the poles, the waters flowing clean and free, not just as drainage ditches for the never-ending parking lots—can be taken from us, then how dearly do we treasure it. Then how longingly and sadly, as it slips from us, do we caress this gift from God where

"late the sweet birds sang" (to echo the title of an end-of-earth science fiction novel by Kate Wilhelm) but increasingly sing no more.

I can only pray that my faith—unprovable though it is—in my own dwelling in God's hands even beyond the edge of the world will somehow have implications as well for this planet God once created and of which God once said that it was good. I pray that somehow, between whatever we do for the world as it slips away and however God still sends healing power into this marred goodness, something of the grandeur will live on even as so much dies.

At the Edge of Too Many People's Ending

Then there are the people on this good sad earth. As I write the press is filled with daily and even hourly updates about who hates whom in just what ways and who deserves what for whatever terrible thing the other person or country is thought to have done or to be about to do. Above all, as memories of September 11, 2001, swirl around its first anniversary, there is that ceaseless insistence of U.S. leaders that they know what deserves to end and are entitled to bring it about as they see fit.

As I listen to such talk, I don't know precisely what should be happening instead. What I do know is that rarely do I recognize in it the nuances of people who truly believe in their own ending or that of the world. They may, they may. But if so, they express it differently than I would. Because I believe people who felt death's

reality shiver in their own depths would not so easily say that if some countries, which just happen to have in them more of that fuel we love so much, are headed in the wrong direction, well, we'll just have to do whatever we need to do to stop them.

I don't mean to minimize the dangers of terrorism; I don't mean to suggest that when airplanes topple towers we should do nothing at all. I don't mean here to offer a reasoned plan for what should happen when countries harbor those eager to send more Americans up in flames. These are difficult times and issues and I doubt any one ideology, my own included, is large enough to provide all answers.

What I do believe is that even if national leaders cannot be expected to be pacifists, they should be expected at the very least to have stared death in the face, to have been sobered by it, and to show evidence that they understand what it means to take a life, whether that of the earth itself or of other people.

One of our leaders is reputed to have done something remarkably close to giggling when questioned about his involvement in the capital punishment of Karla Faye Tucker, whose death he had some power to stop. If the report is close to true, that leader had not, then at least, begun to look hard enough at death.

Has he since gazed fully upon the reality of his own mortality? Has he truly asked what sacred power of life and death over others he holds before he uses it? Has he loved the world and the people in it long enough and hard enough to be able to claim that he knows what he is doing when he exerts domination over them? If he did fully love, would he be able to kill as quickly as he seems ready to? And if he did not kill, if instead he loved, would those he says want to kill us be as ready to do so as he says they are?

These are the kinds of questions that come to me as, too full now of the knowledge that it all ends, I stand at the edge of my own death, the death of the earth, and possibly the imminent death, at our country's hands, of countless people in it. As too many endings at once threaten, how much I love what still lives on. How much I hope that where we can we will draw back from the brink. And how much I pray, because I know that some endings at least are inescapable, that where we cannot flee a given ending there will turn out to be so much more beyond it than we now can know. Otherwise where is our hope?

—Michael A. King, Telford, Pennsylvania, is pastor, Spring Mount (Pa.) Mennonite Church; and editor, DreamSeeker Magazine.



Time to Pay Attention to the Environmental Crisis

Daniel Hertzler

Eco-Economy: Building an Economy for the Earth by Lester R. Brown. W. W. Norton, 2001.

Earth Habitat: Eco-Injustice and the Church's Response. Edited by Dieter Hessel and Larry Rasmussen. Fortress Press, 2001.

Creation and Environment: An Anabaptist Perspective on a Sustainable World. Edited by Calvin Redekop. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000.

I began to consider the first of these books, by Brown, then became aware of the second. In the meantime, I remembered I had the third on my shelf. Each provides some contribution toward understanding the environmental crisis. All agree that the crisis is real and not trumped up by some “tree huggers.” The second and third books are composed of papers read at conferences and exhibit the usual lack of focus caused by a variety of sources. The first has the advantage of

sustained attention to the issue. Lester Brown has been engaging this question for a professional lifetime.

How is it that we have come to where we are in relation to our environment? Who has decreed that we should be free to “trash” it? I have heard that some blame Genesis 1 as the culprit. There is some evidence for this, as Dieter Hessel points out. “Especially during the modern period, secular cheerleaders for nature manipulation and destructive development, beginning with Francis Bacon, pursued dominion logic as humanity’s mandate, following the lead of P—the Priestly liturgy, that is, Genesis 1” (*Earth Habitat*, 190, 191).

But there is also Genesis 2, which has a different perspective. Theodore Hiebert observes that “While the Priestly human has a management role within the natural world, the Yahwist’s [as some scholars refer to a possible source of Gen. 2] farmer is more of an equal member of the community of life and a servant of nature’s processes” (*Creation and the Environment*, 117).

A Hebrew editor has provided both accounts. How shall we use them? I suppose a typical approach is to choose the one we like best, as Bacon and his followers have evidently done—to justify what they wanted to do anyhow. We need to dig deeper than this.

Larry Rasmussen accounts for our present problems by reference to “the

forces of modernity” and “three successive waves of ‘globalization’” He identifies these as “conquest and colonization . . . post-World War II development . . . and free-trade capitalism” (*Earth Habitat*, 10, 11). In other words, environmental degradation has come along with the freedom of capitalism to do what it wishes in the world. (Communism, of course, did

badly also when it was a force. But its ability is now much diminished.) Calvin Redekop puts it bluntly: “The environmental crisis has developed because of human hubris” (*Creation and Environment*, 206, 207).

As both of the latter two books acknowledge,

the churches are not precisely famous for environmental concern. Dieter Hessel observes that “Christian communions, while claiming to be exceptional, have mostly been quite conventional in relating to environmental issues” (*Earth Habitat*, 191). Walter Klaassen asserts that “It was the need to survive and not love of the land that produced the expertise and care of the land for which Mennonites have become famous” (*Creation and Environment*, 142).

Lester Brown has been paying attention to environmental issues since 1974, when he founded the Worldwatch Institute. In the book *Eco-Economy*, he extensively documents how the environment is being destroyed. He says the culprits are basically three: 1) overpopulation; 2)

How is it that we have come to where we are in relation to our environment? Who has decreed that we should be free to “trash” it?

affluence and overconsumption; 3) the burning of fossil fuels. In Brown's view there are solutions to all three of these problems, but they will call on all of us to pay attention and take appropriate action.

In numbers of cases, production and consumption are separated in the global market so that consumers may have no idea of what was involved in the production of a given commodity. Two specific examples Brown highlights are gold wedding rings and bottled water. He reports that to obtain the gold for a pair of wedding rings calls for a hole six feet deep, six feet wide, and 10 feet long. "Fortunately, for the newlyweds, this hole is in someone else's backyard. So, too, is the cyanide used to separate the gold from the ore" (123). Brown returns to the problem of gold several times. "In damage per ton of metal produced, nothing comes close to gold" (129).

Next he takes up the question of bottled water. He indicates that it is no safer than water out of the tap "even though it can cost 1000 times as much. . . ."

Brown observes that "Phasing out the use of bottled water would eliminate the need for the fleet of trucks that haul the water and distribute it. This in turn would reduce the materials needed to manufacture the trucks as well as the traffic congestion, air pollution and rising carbon dioxide levels associated with their operation" (142). Yet everywhere we look these days we see people drinking water from plastic bottles.

Some changes in favor of the environment can be made by individuals.

Others require change of whole systems. Brown has a vision for this also. He would tax environmentally dangerous activities to make clear the total cost to the country. He proposes that "environmental scientists and economists work together to calculate the cost of climate disruption, acid rain, and air pollution. This figure could then be incorporated as a tax on coal-fired electricity that, when added to the current price, would give the full cost of coal used" (23).

A similar tax should be collected from automobile and truck transportation, a system which is highly subsidized in this country. According to Brown the subsidy is \$111 billion a year (243).

"We can now see what an eco-economy looks like," writes Brown. "Instead of being run on fossil fuels, it will be powered by sources of energy that derive from the sun, such as wind and sunlight, and by geothermal energy from within the earth. . . . Cars and buses will run on fuel-cell engines powered by electricity produced with an electro-chemical process using hydrogen as fuel instead of internal combustion engines" (83).

Some countries have already taken steps in this direction. Denmark, says Brown, is the leader. Costa Rica hopes to be altogether "on renewable energy by 2025." Iceland has set out to be the first country to shift to a "hydrogen powered economy" (81, 82). Brown asserts that "As the new century begins, the sun is setting on the fossil fuel era" (98).

Supporting news arrives on the Internet from Earth Policy Institute.

It summarizes the efforts of five European countries to implement taxes on environmentally destructive products and at the same time reducing taxes on income. As the report indicates, changing taxes affects behavior. "The goal of tax restructuring is to get the market to tell the ecological truth."

As may be expected, the U.S., as the biggest economy and the biggest polluter, is the slowest to change. It appears that the problem is made worse by having "oilmen" such as George W. Bush and Richard Cheney in the White House.

An editorial in *Mother Jones* magazine (July Aug. 2002) says that Bush missed an opportunity for progressive energy leadership following the September 11 disaster. "Rather than seize the moment and confront the issues head-on," says the editorial, "Bush and his vice president did exactly what we should have expected from two businessmen from the Texas oil patch—continue to dismiss energy conservation as a matter of 'personal virtue' and proceed with an energy plan . . . that ignores the potential of renewable alternatives and emphasizes yet more drilling and more mining."

Yet, as the magazine reports, changes are coming despite a foot-dragging government. In the same issue, Bill McKibben writes of a trip he took in his new Honda Civic hybrid which delivered 59 miles per gallon.

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Alex Markels reports that wind generation for electricity is catching on. Even some big energy companies have discovered that there is money to be made from wind. (We ourselves have several small "windfarms" in western Pennsylvania.)

While we wait for the government to catch up with the Europeans, who are well on the way, there are things for us to do as individuals. As simple as anything is to drive a smaller car. Leslie Stahl has reported on the CBS program "60 Minutes" that improving gas mileage by one or two miles per gallon would save more oil than could be found in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

Yet some are not paying sufficient attention. In the centerfold of the August 2002 issue of *Smithsonian* magazine is an ad for the Ford Explorer, a gas-guzzling SUV. We see ads like this everywhere, but it annoyed me to see it in what I consider a "quality" magazine. I sent them an e-mail complaining about the ad, especially the slogan "Seek and ye shall find no boundaries." Thus the ad used Jesus to endorse American greed. I urged upon them Lester Brown's *Eco-Economy*.

In a summary chapter in *Creation and Environment*, Calvin Redekop offers four "Practical Suggestions for Everyone." The fourth is "Finally, we can begin by changing ourselves" (213). I could have wished for something more specific like Bill McK-

ibben's 59 mpg Honda. It may be that my friend Cal, like others of my generation, remembers church discipline that was unimaginative and heavy-handed. Nevertheless, since environmental problems have come about through specific actions, they will only be solved through specific actions.

Brown would have us know that global warming is a fact. Nothing we can do today will deliver us from it. But there are things to do to solve the problem in the long run. How soon will we begin?

An irony highlighted by the ad in *Smithsonian* is that Jesus uttered his saying in a culture where there were shortages of just about everything. According to Richard L. Rohrbaugh, about two percent of the population sat on the top of the heap and owned most of the agricultural land. For the rest there was scarcity.

In contrast, ours is a society where there is an overabundance of just about everything. Even my local auto

mechanic observed recently that there are too many automobiles. Yet it seems that all the Ford company can think of to do is to manufacture more cars and press them upon us. When the American people hold back on spending, there is a recession and the government starts to worry.

These three books agree that we need a better vision than this. Our destiny is not fulfilled in the "no boundaries" of the *Smithsonian* ad, but in sensible discipline, and unwillingness to accept capitalistic doctrines at face value. And what about those gold wedding rings and the bottled water?

—*Daniel Hertzler, Scottsdale, Pennsylvania, drives a Honda Civic, but not a hybrid like Bill McKibben's. Yet he can testify to having seen one last spring at the local dealership. As McKibben testifies in his Mother Jones article, they don't look any different. They just get better mileage.*



Mary Ann's Secret

Noël R. King

Mary Ann had a secret.

At first she was not going to tell anybody, but then she saw how impossible that was going to be. She would have had to tape her mouth shut practically, she realized, in order not to tell her secret. And being a practical person, she decided instead just to tell it.

But that sounded a lot easier than it actually turned out to be.

Because Mary Ann's secret was very strange. It's like self-stick stamps. Something that seems so self-evident once you know about it but before then is completely out of the realm of awareness. That is what Mary Ann's secret was like.

But first I'll tell you what happened after she discovered her secret. Mary Ann had always been a very bitter woman. She tried not to be, but she really felt like she couldn't help it.

"I am a bitter, bitter woman," in fact is what she said to herself on her forty-fourth birthday last year. "And I do not know what to do about it. I have tried all I know to try to become sweet and lovely, but I simply do not have this capability. I shall probably die a bitter, bitter woman."

She felt all shriveled up inside, like a prune or even a carrot that's been left out in the sunshine for two or

three days. Or what you feel inside your mouth when somebody says the word “desiccated.” Your tongue starts to shrivel up, doesn’t it? Well this is what Mary Ann had felt like more and more each year since about the age of six, sadly enough.

She tried drinking more water, even though she knew that was silly. But when you are desperate you will try almost anything. And Mary Ann was also one of the most desperate people she knew, which was an unusual combination. Most bitter, shriveled up people do not have enough left inside them to feel desperation, but Mary Ann was one of the lucky ones, as we shall see.

So one day Mary Ann was sitting on the bus, staring out the tinted green window. It was a very sunny day, and she supposed she was probably supposed to feel happy about this, but instead it just made her feel even more shriveled and dried-up inside. She reached in her large black purse to see if she could find an old piece of gum somewhere. Anything at all to add some moisture back into her life. Nope, no gum.

So she went back to looking outside the window. When the bus turned the corner, the sun hit her face from the bit of window that was only faintly tinted and it made her blink rapidly a couple of times.

That’s when Mary Ann’s life changed.

“I blink; therefore I am,” is the only way she would explain it for a very long time afterwards even when I asked her repeatedly to tell me what she meant. How could blinking get you anywhere in life other than to keep your eyeballs nice and moist? I just didn’t get it. But it was obvious Mary Ann’s life was changing in dramatic ways, and I could see no outer reason for it at all. None at all.

Every time I sat with her, starting just a few days after her encounter with herself on the bus, I intently watched Mary Ann’s blinking eyes, trying to understand her secret. Blink. Blink. Blink. The only thing I could see was a small Mona Lisa

smile whenever Mary Ann blinked. And sometimes she would breathe deeply and then smile more broadly. But this set of facts did not help me at all. It just made me more intensely curious. In fact, now I was the one feeling desperate.

Oh yes. I forgot to tell you that Mary Ann untwisted into the sweetest, nicest woman around. She would tell anyone who wanted to hear it how wonderful and full of sweetness her life had become.

“Just like a fresh piece of juicy, yummy Bubble Yum,” I heard her repeat on more than one occasion. “I am just one sweet sugar moment after the next—and all without tooth de-

cay, too!” Then she would chuckle and even sometimes chortle and blink some more.

The more I saw Mary Ann’s life fill up with sweetness the more bitter mine began to taste. Now I was the one pawing in my pockets and kitchen drawers for old pieces of gum and constantly chugging on a liter of water, trying to unshriveled my life from the inside out.

I begged and begged Mary Ann to be more specific with me, to tell me exactly what changed her life. Looking back, I think she made me beg for so long because she wanted to be darn sure I wasn’t just asking out of curiosity. She was not going to give away her secret only for somebody like me to laugh it into the ground and grind it away. Apparently she had learned the hard way those first few days, even if she was now sweet and all.

So finally Mary Ann told me that if I swore I would tell nobody else without first consulting with her and that I would just drop it and never mention it again after she told me, she would tell me.

I swore. I swore on a million Bibles—or at least that’s what I told Mary Ann.

And she told me.

I still don’t get it, though. But do you want me to tell you anyway? I mean, because I could just pack up my pen and walk away now without

ever mentioning it again. Do you really care what she told me?

Yes. No.

If you chose yes, please continue. If you chose no, thank you for your honesty.

If you are reading this far, apparently you want to be, so I’ll let you be the judge of that.

Well, then, here’s Mary Ann’s wacko story.

“I blink, I receive. I blink, I believe. I blink, I retrieve it all back to me.” When I just blinked at her after she told me this, she sighed—but sweetly—and tried again.

“Every time I blink, I fold all I see around me back into myself. Don’t you see? Blinking says I see you, I believe you, I accept you to the Universe. There—that’s all I’m going to say about it. Care for another glass of lemonade?”

I said yes because I was parched, and I asked for extra, extra sugar. Then I blinked all the way home and got a headache from all that blinking. I didn’t want to tell you this earlier, but I still don’t know what she was talking about.

—As circumstances warrant, through her Turquoise Pen column Noël R. King reports from Reston, Virginia, on some very strange and wonderful things, including the power (or not) of blinking.





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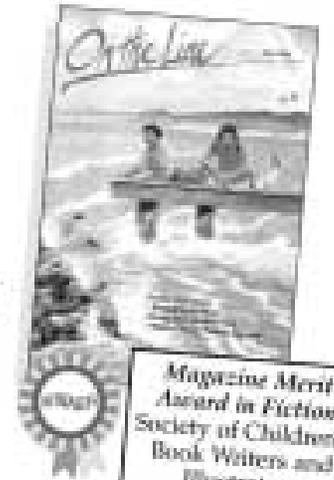
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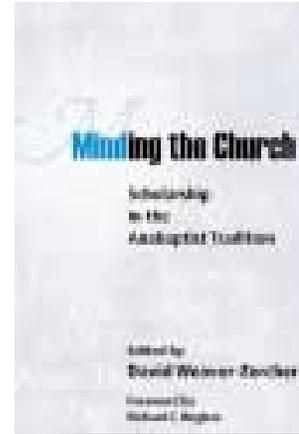
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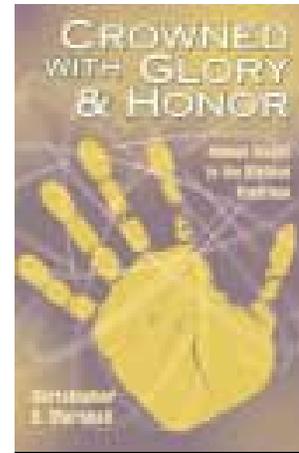
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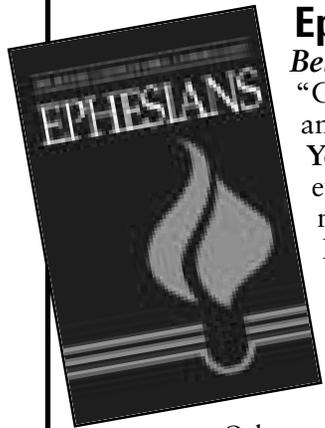
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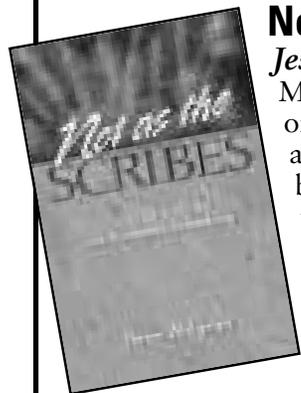
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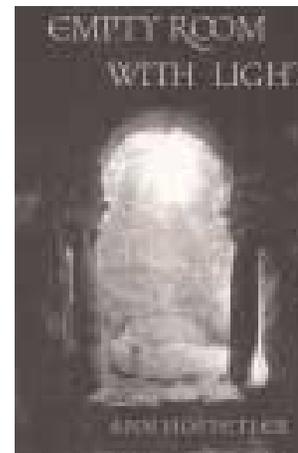
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Old Women

Everywhere I go these days I see old women.
A tiny one with mouse eyes
cradling a banana
exiting the dining room
at the retirement center;
A peevish one helping her teetering mate
edge his cane down the concrete steps
of the Glad Welcome Community church.

Everywhere I go these days I watch
old women. Watch thin legs inch
along the sidewalk, making it home
with a bag of groceries and a clutched key.

Forgive my watching. I am
seeing myself. I cannot know
how it will be but everywhere I go
these days I am trying to find out.

An old woman is busy at the desk at the Y.
She has her body. She has her mind.
She has her means. I'll be her!
No doling out dollars at the drug counter,
hair in clumps, dress on backward
like a prescription for depression.
I'll keep everything needful until the light strikes.

Please. Please?

—*Barbara Esch Shisler*