

DreamSeeker Magazine

Voices from the Soul



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Laura Lehman Amstutz

The Turquoise Pen

Jonny Come Lately

Noël R. King

Beneath the Skyline

So What Do You Do?

Deborah Good

and much more

Autumn 2005

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Editorial: Life Is Rich and Precious

Life is rich and precious. For me the weather in the eastern U.S., which turns often so beautiful in autumn you can hardly stand it, just before the death of the leaves, the grass, and the sweet warm air, teaches this. So it seems appropriate that the writings in this autumn issue of *DreamSeeker Magazine* tell us something similar.

Life is rich. Life throbs with moments to be savored, thoughts to be rolled carefully through the mind, relationships to be treasured. And the richness is so easy to miss, to take for granted, to corrupt.

This is what Kirsten Beachy shows as she reports on Amish country and, though not quite ready to live within this land of her ancestors, longs for ways to bring parts of it into her own current life. This is what Esther Yoder Stenson, herself once Amish, shows us as she allows herself to be the poetic voice of her aunt, also formerly Amish, and to portray that way of life in rich detail.

Life's richness is what Lauren McKinney describes with a grin. And what Mark Wenger and Renee Gehman emphasize in their meditations on paying attention to life and on planning for spontaneity.

Then Laura Amstutz invites us into the fantastic story of Harry Potter as part of helping us see how fantastically rich our own story is. And Noël King explores what can be learned from Jonny, who writes very short stories lest the muse carry him

into the terror—but also richness—of larger and more unpredictable stories.

The theme twists toward the preciousness of life with Deborah Good's column. Having movingly invited readers of earlier columns to walk with her through the illness of her father, here Deborah reports what life is like on the other side of her father's death. What at least this reader sees in her portrait is that life after such great loss is painful indeed—and precious, as we can see all too clearly

when the fact that life is only ours on loan is underscored.

Next through the prism of Batman Dave Greiser introduces the complexities of defending this precious life from evil when we ourselves are not entirely good guys. In my own column I wrestle with the related question of how to think about absolute truth when our particular "absolute" truth so easily tempts us for its sake to take another's precious life. Then I turn issues of war and peace over to Daniel Hertzler, who capably explores the many ways people of peace have sought to treasure rather than take life as the United States has gone to war.

Finally Darrin Belousek both confronts the horrors of war and juxtaposes them with the dream of the kingdom of God, reminding us once more of how fantastic life can be if we let it.

—Michael A. King

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Darrin Belousek

Letters

Dear Editors:

Just a word to let you know I especially appreciated the Swartley/Hiebert exchange (Summer 2005) and to encourage you to continue to print such articles. I also liked the Hertzler reviews.

—Ken Henke, Princeton, New Jersey

Dear Editors:

I became familiar with your publication through my son Jeremiah sending me some articles. The most recent article sent my way was “Imperfect Scraps,” by Deborah Good (Summer 2005).

Thank you, Deborah, for your honest sharing and timely reminder again to me, as a mid-50s male who is learning to accept his once healthy/buff body that now begins to sag and soften.

Deborah, know that my thoughts and prayers are with you and your family as your dad has finally escaped his imperfect body. I can in no way understand or know what you are experiencing, but I remember you now and ask God to meet you in body, mind, and spirit.

Thanks and blessings.

—John H. Denlinger, Gordonville, Pennsylvania

Backache Saga

The day Aunt Katie let my
tiny body fall back from
her arms with a jerk,
like a rag doll,
I cried all day like a knife
had done cut me through
for good.

Pain followed my years like
that dog Mickey followed
us everywhere.

Still my brothers made me
drive the horse attached to
the hay wagon over rutted
fields, cultivate corn and
arrange shocks in endless rows;
my back felt like plowed
earth, sleep was impossible.

The brace around my torso for
three hot summers, beginning
with my sixteenth year, was so
unbearable I took a yardstick
to scratch driving-me-crazy itch
inside the metal cast that
didn't do a bit a good.

Finally, Dr. Cassidy said I'd be
paralyzed if I refused last-chance
surgery in Lewistown.

They cut me open like a carcass,
used silver bolts and burrs to
fasten femur from my leg onto
backbone while 'bout every doctor on
the East Coast, like a circle of
curious cows, stood around my bed
observing this experimental operation.

I never saw Dad cryin' like he did
when we thought I was dyin' after
my second awful feverish day.
He had to leave me with Mother
to await the clock's eleventh hour
which the doctor said would
determine my fate and I believe
he must've been prayin' mightily
as the dreaded time approached.

The moment came and
I felt a change comin' over me
sure as I'm sittin' here.

Under no medication
the pain and fever slunk
away like a whipped cur,
and life coursed through my
body like when God first
breathed into Adam.

That night I slept so good
I was sittin' up eatin' the first
breakfast I'd wanted in days
when my dad walked in
off the milk truck he'd hitched
a ride on, looked at me like he was
seein' the Resurrection, and repeated
"I can't believe it! I can't believe it!"

My aunt Amelia Kanagy grew up in Mifflin County, Pennsylvania, moved with her family to Virginia, left the Amish, joined the Mennonites in Florida, and finally followed an itinerant evangelist to California. There she spent most of her life before returning to Virginia. I have turned little vignettes from her life journey into poems for my Master's thesis in creative writing. The poems are written in her voice, and the stories are not made up (mostly).

—*Esther Yoder Stenson, Harrisonburg, Virginia, was born in Virginia but, like her aunt, left the Amish and lived in such far places as El Salvador and China. She works as an ESOL professional in the Reading/Writing Resource Center, James Madison University, Harrisonburg.*

Report from Amish Country

Kirsten Eve Beachy

The man behind the bullet-proof glass in the hotel lobby asks if we've ever been to Holmes and Tuscarawas counties before. We shake our heads. He decides that the boy in the flannel shirt and the girl in frayed Indian-print pants are harmless. He pushes open his office door to bring us tourist pamphlets.

Women wearing prayer coverings beam up from the glossy brochures, men in straw hats and untamed beards carve wood; even the wineries have buggies in their logos. The clerk assumes that we're here to goggle at the Amish, but we are Amish, practically. Jason and I figured it up: adding our bloodlines together, you get 17/16th of an Amish person and 15/16th of a Mennonite.

We're here on family business. We want to visit the historical society and ferret out information on Jonas Stutzman, who dressed in white from his hat to his shoes. Jason's also tracking his great-great-grandmother's first husband, who died in a boiler explosion. And we might swing by Lehman's nonelectric store, the mecca of homesteaders, the store that made a fortune during the Y2K scare when folks stuffed their garages full of generators and lanterns and fireplace popcorn poppers.

In the morning, we find our breakfast at one of the enormous feeding-houses built along Route 39. They don't serve scrapple, but our waitresses wear pinafores, and racks of Amish books, Amish soft drinks, and Amish toys block the way to the cash register.

As we exit, a group of Amishmen enters. I avert my eyes, trying to neutralize the overdose of stares they must receive daily, trying to send out Mennonite vibes: *I'm sort of like you, even though I drive a car and watch cable television. Sort of.*

You can tell the moment Route 39 enters Holmes county because the brittle, tar-patched road evens out into a smooth ride for tourists, and every 50 feet another sign proclaims Heini's cheese factory. We turn up Route 77 and stop at the Mennonite and Amish heritage center, Behalt.

Milton Yoder, in the dark, collarless coat of a conservative Mennonite, guides us through the central attraction of Behalt, the cyclorama. The mural encircles an enormous round room with overlapping scenes rendered in Heinz Gaugel's vibrant—some might say garish—hues. Yoder uses a laser pointer to indicate important events in Anabaptist history.

First, of course, comes Christ, muscular and oddly golden at his crucifixion. After him come scenes of early martyrs; the evils of the institutionalized church; the Anabaptist he-

roes, Grebel, Blaurock, and Manz. We contemplate a headless neck, cartoonish with the white end of the bone visible, the cut flesh red around it like a rib eye steak. Ulrich Ulman, the first Anabaptist beheaded.

"It's a bit exaggerated," explains Yoder. He turns our attention quickly to Menno Simons, slipping away to safety on a blue night with his wife and child. Later comes a house on fire, the Hostetlers in Berks County, Pennsylvania, getting slaughtered in a raid during the French and Indian War. "Our ancestors!" we say excitedly. Yoder nods. "There are lots of you."

Finally we reach the man we've been watching for: Jonas Stutzman in white coat and pants, gazing up into the sky in feverish anticipation, his white beard wild in hurricane-strength winds, his hands uplifting a chair to the heavens. Because of the overlapping perspectives of the mural, Jonas Stutzman looks to be standing on the backs of two shaggy oxen. It suits him.

"Jonas Stutzman believed Jesus would return in 1853 and set up office in Holmes County, so he built a chair for him. The seat is six inches higher than normal because Christ should be above everyone else," Yoder says, then turns us around so that we can see what was hidden by the central pillar when we entered the room. The chair Jonas built sits on a little pedestal. It's

Later comes a house on fire, the Hostetlers in Berks County, Pennsylvania, getting slaughtered in a raid during the French and Indian War. "Our ancestors!" we say excitedly.

roughly hewn of a wood I can't name, the seat woven with strips of cane. Jonas is long gone, but the chair still waits for Jesus.

A final set of scenes shows Anabaptist congregations worshiping: an Amish church, Hutterite and Conservative Mennonite congregations, and Conference Mennonites, with men and women sitting together.

I am what they call a conference Mennonite, but I don't wear a prayer doily on my head like the long-haired women on the wall. In the gift shop, I have a chance to try on a covering but don't take it. My mother and grandmother removed theirs years ago, and I'm not eager to go back.

Instead, we plunder the bookstore for genealogical materials. In *Some Fascinating Stutzman Ancestors*, Gregory Hartzler-Miller tells about two of Jonas Stutzman's brothers: Jost went into the Pennsylvania House of Representatives, Christian to the Ohio Lunatic Asylum.

Before we go, we sign the guest register. "Oh!" says the woman who watches the desk, a Conservative Mennonite, I guess, by her covering. "You're a Beachy? So was I."

It's nice to have a name, at least, that links me to the community, even though my clothing makes me incognito. She gives us directions to an Amish library, suggests we stop at the lumber company for help.

Back on the road, we're surprised by how much congestion the buggies cause, then realize that all the cars are the real problem. It's not that the buggies are too slow—it's that the rest of

us are far too fast. How could we forget it's Memorial Day weekend? We can't tell which of the unmarked houses on a back road is the library, so we backtrack to the lumber company, and Jason disappears inside. I bury my face in a book as Amish folk hurry in and out, afraid they might gawk at me. I'm the minority here.

Jason returns with the key, and we find the place and let ourselves in. There's no electricity, but gas lights hang from the ceiling and a copy machine sits in one corner. We search the shelves by the light from the windows. Genealogy, Anabaptist literature, back issues of local papers.

Surprises, too. A floor-to-ceiling shelf of *National Geographic*s. Dostoevsky. Turgenev. Along one wall sit two small chairs, just like Jesus' chair, but kid-sized. The placard says Jonas Stutzman traveled from household to household making chairs without nails, joining green and dry wood together so the fittings would tighten as the wood shrank.

Our second family question resolves when we find, hanging on the wall, the original newspaper article about the 1882 boiler explosion that killed Jason's great-great-grandmother's husband, George Stutzman. The boiler ran a steam-powered sawmill, and four men died when it burst. The article, less squeamish than today's newspapers, unflinchingly describes how one man was "burst open and part of his internal organs out" and the "fence rail smeared with blood and flesh." The frame the article hangs in was made from pieces of that fence.

We're hungry for lunch despite the gory account, so we drive down streets of gingerbreaded Amish Treasures and kitchified Amish Kitchens, cars double-parked, sidewalks choked with holidayers. We break out the emergency pretzels and drive to Kidron, where we find a lunchroom under a grocery store and eat our \$2-dollar sandwiches surrounded by Amish kids.

Lehman's General Store. We've spent the past few years poring over the contraptions in their catalogue: mills we could use to grind our wheat into flour, if we grew our own wheat; churns for butter, if we had a cow; fruit dryers for preserving the harvest of the peach and apple orchards in our minds' eyes. We enter the original part of the store, a reconstructed log house. Warehouses attach to the store like barnacles, and a flock of storage barns gathers behind it.

At first I'm skeptical, eyeing pricey pottery and even more expensive Amish-made baskets. But then I enter a room full of bells—sleigh bells of all sizes, brass bells from Germany, cow bells, great black dinner bells to hang outside. The Amish might come here to buy bells. There are wind chimes, too, enormous ones as resonant as church bells, like the ones we bought last year at the MCC relief sale, the ones too loud to hang in the crowded suburb where we live.

As we venture past the imported tin toys and Amish-made marble gadgets, more practical implements appear: walls of rakes, hoes, forks, scythes, spades, a mallet of rolled

rawhide, honest purchases, like the jelly jars I think of buying for the strawberries I plan to buy next month.

We find a copper cauldron big enough to boil me in, a giant wooden spoon to match. If I made jam to fill this pot, it would last for decades—unless we had a dozen children. Looking at the cookstoves, I lust, perhaps foolishly, after the Alderfer family stove back on Jason's folks' farm, with its shiny enamel, its firebox, the widened margins of error and perfection in bread-baking. I want to know how to use such things.

Such things are all about, hanging from the ceiling, even, to create an old-time ambience: rusty hay rakes and wringer-washers, a funny four-runner sled. Take a look at the classic Hoosier cabinet with its flour sifter, rollback doors, and spice racks. You could put in a whole set of kitchen cabinets for the price of one of these babies. "We have one of those back home on the farm," says Jason. "We put the mail on it."

Move on to the laundry room. Here's an expensive, eco-friendly Staber washer that uses less water and detergent to wash bigger loads with a shorter spin cycle. For the hardcore Amish, there are galvanized steel laundry tubs with hand wringers attached.

We buy nothing but stagger back out to the car to nap until the next rainstorm passes. When we return to the Amish library, I sleep some more as Jason goes next door to see if the caretaker is home. I wake to hear a generator kicking on. So that's how they run the Xerox machine.

I pick up the book about Jonas Stutzman. He once broke his leg cutting wood five miles from home, made a splint and crutches, and hobbled home. Later in life, he had his visions of Christ's return, used the "science of numbers" to pin down the date, and wrote five different Appeals to his fellow men and women.

There's no record that Jonas ever had a following inside or outside of the church, but on the other hand, no one ever tried to put him in the Ohio Lunatic Asylum. I get the sense that people tolerated his visions. He called for support of his ill-conceived cause in his third Appeal:

All those individuals, who sincerely and seriously desire to take active interest in the great cause of God, are hereby requested, to inform me thereof in post-paid letter, in which they also may advise me somewhat more in detail of the various circumstances of their situation, to enable me thereby to perceive more clearly and judge more correctly—how—where—and in what manner their cooperation may be rendered most available for the promotion of this holy cause. Please direct to: Jonas Stutzman, Walnut Creek Post Office, Holmes County, Ohio.

Sometimes I think civilization is like an overweighted boiler. We know it will blow sometime, at least run out or boil over; it's a great pyramid scheme that doesn't account for the reality of limited natural resources.

But 1853 came and went without Christ's return, but Jonas continued to wear white for the rest of his life. His confidence in "the science of numbers" and his ability to predict the proper time were dashed. A friend discovered Jonas's grandfather clock in the pigsty.

Jason returns from the library victorious, with copies in hand, and we start the long drive home. He tells me the boiler explosion happened because George Stutzman, his almost-ancestor, weighted the escape valve so that the boiler would provide more power. The men knew it wasn't safe but joked that if it blew, only four would be killed and plenty of workers were around to take their places.

I watch the farmsteads pass the window, clean and green from the rain. Sometimes I think civilization is like an overweighted boiler. We know it will blow sometime, at least run out or boil over; it's a great pyramid scheme that doesn't account for the reality of limited natural resources. Sometimes I think I should go home to the Amish, beg them to take me in now, before the refugees come streaming over the hills from the cities.

It's not that I want to be Amish, to wear long sleeves on summer days and submit to one rigid version of goodness. But I want to step outside the economy of useless possessions, work

that uses only a small fraction of my capabilities as a human creature.

I'm soft, easily tired. My muscles don't know what it is to work, barely remember the joy in the power of stacking wood with my dad. I want a piece of land, a garden, wheat fields, chickens. I want a windmill and solar panels. I want to kill the meat I eat. But I'd still like to write, to make phone calls, to read shocking novels, to go to the theater.

"Wouldn't it be neat," I ask Jason, "To live off the grid? We could run a Staber washer with solar power and bake with the family wood oven."

"Seems like an expensive hobby," he says, even though he agrees.

We pass a silo with an advertisement painted on it—a bear stealing away with a roll of carpeting in its paws: Bear Country Floor Coverings. Bear Country. We've left Amish Country behind.

It's nuts to even think of giving up the cushy jobs, inexpensive commodities, the energy of the thundering heavens straight from Dominion Power for \$50 a month. We'd need a community to support us, a remote location to protect us from gawkers—and vision. We'd need to find people who don't mind wearing white shoes

after Labor Day, who wanted to build something for Jesus—something nobody's built yet, a divine toothpick in preparation for the day when he stops in for dinner on his stroll around the kingdom of heaven, which, as he said, is here.

I appeal to all those individuals, who sincerely and seriously desire to take active interest in this great cause of God: please inform me thereof via e-mail, and advise me somewhat more in detail of the various circumstances of your situation, to enable me thereby to perceive more clearly and judge more correctly how, where, and in what manner your cooperation may be rendered most available for the promotion of this holy cause. Please direct to: Kirsten Beachy, thekirsteneve@yahoo.com, Subject: Neo-Amish Utopia.

—*Kirsten Eve Beachy, Harrisonburg, Virginia, is completing her MFA in creative writing at West Virginia University and this week took tentative steps toward utopia by acquiring three laying hens to go with her borrowed backyard and blind cat in the Shenandoah Valley. She and Jason are housesitting in the country for a year.*



Parable of the Raw Eggs

Lauren D. McKinney

It was Ted's turn to do children's time at church today, and he was in overachiever mode. He wasn't going to be one of those slackers who mumble a story from a book and hurriedly say "Okay, you can go back to your seats now!" before the children can ask any questions.

No. He carried a large plastic tub and wore a white jacket he appeared to have wrested from a petite woman. The children gathered around, and he took bowls of baking powder, flour, chocolate chips, and sugar out of the tub. He started giving out cookie ingredients to the children so they could dump them in a big mixing bowl. My sons Jack and Will got sticks of butter and Lucas got flour, which he was fine with until Ted started to "help" him stir it. Destiny got to break eggs into the bowl all by herself.

Around this time, I began pretending really hard that this wasn't happening. Had no idea I was going to have to worry about greasy little hands and floury clothes *at church*. Ted's hands were now covered in flour, butter, and sugar up past his wrists because he realized that stirring cookie dough with a spoon takes too long, and children's time is supposed to take about five minutes. Pastor was waiting to preach. Had been

waiting a while. “I washed my hands,” Ted assured us unconvincingly.

The point of children’s time seems to have been something about cooperating, I was gathering through my disassociation haze, as Ted cheerfully assigned another person with dirty hands to pass out large lumps of raw cookie dough directly into the hands of the children. The small, trusting souls crammed the blobs into their mouths with delight.

“Thanks, Ted! That was fun!” I lied wildly. Praise should be heaped

upon anyone making an effort to be creative with children’s time, short of using matches and lighter fluid to demonstrate a burning bush. The cookies got baked during church, and we all had some. They were delicious, and no one is sick yet. God is good.

—*Lauren D. McKinney lives with her husband, John Swartzentruber, and two sons Will and Jack in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania. She and her family attend Germantown Mennonite Church.*

False Teeth (1939)

Eighteen years old,
teeth all rotten like
kernels gone bad
when Mom took me
to Lewistown to pull ‘em
all for twenty dollars —
no fillin’ teeth
those days.

Ran away from callers and
covered my ugly flat mouth
nine months of Sundays with
flowerdy hankies to keep
folks from seein’ how
my nose and mouth met
like a hag as gums
shrank to proper size for
forty-five-dollar chompers.

Fittin’ day I preened like a
peacock goin’ home,
till I stopped at McCrory’s to
buy straight pins for Mom,
my mouth suddenly felt fulla nails.
The dime store clerk seein’ my
big black bonnet, pointin’ finger,
and garbled Jr-rr-rr, must’ve thought
I was some dumb Dutchman
that couldn’t speak proper English.

But it was better’n havin’
a mouth fulla lies
like some o’
those ol’ men
up in Washington
nowadays.

—*Esther Yoder Stenson*

Paying Attention

Mark R. Wenger

I spend much of Saturday showing some dear Virginia friends around our new neighborhood in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. We stroll through Central Market, drive through Amish country across a covered bridge. We visit a quilt museum and tour the Hans Herr house. It’s a good day, literally touching some things that span the years. Late afternoon after our guests are on their way, I pick up the paper and read a column by Ellen Goodman. Oh, this is good stuff!

Goodman is walking to the post office to mail a letter, the kind with a handwritten address and note. It’s a card of sympathy to a widow. She could have sent it much more efficiently by e-mail. There are hundreds of e-condolences to choose from. But that wouldn’t do. Too easy, too cheap, too mindless, like “serving Thanksgiving dinner at a fast-food restaurant.”

She strolls home after slipping the letter in the slot, wondering if slowing down isn’t the “only way we pay attention now in a world of hyperactive technology.” I mentally add my own twist to bring the logic around fullcircle. Paying attention to things that matter may be the only way to slow down in a world of multitasking media mayhem.

Goodman quotes Linda Stone, a former Microsoft whiz, to describe this so-connected-yet-so-scattered

age. Stone calls it an era of “continuous partial attention.” We live, Stone says, with the illusion that we can expand our personal bandwidth, connecting to more and more. Instead we end up overstimulated, overwhelmed, and unfulfilled.

TMI is a helpful new acronym I learned sometime in the last year. That doesn’t stand for “Three Mile Island” of nuclear infamy. TMI is “too much information” to absorb, to digest, to respond to. Many of us are perpetually “on”—scanning, researching, doing, and always within reach of anyone with our cell number.

We are trying to pay attention, perhaps more desperately than ever before: too many things, going too fast.

Maybe the secret to ending continuous partial attention is to find ways to disengage and give selective full attention to things that matter. The key, I suggest, is found not in more exciting consumption or even production but in the place of creation or re-creation. This is the kind of paying attention that matters, the kind that slows things down enough to let the rest of the world go by at its breakneck speed. Let me offer several anecdotal suggestions.

Gardening.

It is full summer as I write. My father, all of 87 years old, is in his glory

gardening. There are the flowers he harvests for market. Add to that the zucchini he sells for a few cents a piece, the pumpkins, tomatoes, grapes, apples, peaches. He rarely seems stressed about the work. Yes, he’s retired and doesn’t have to worry about raising a family or a nine-to-five job. But he has always found solace and space by working the soil.

There is no way to hurry a sunflower into bloom. No amount of Internet surfing will turn a bare grape vine into purple laden bounty. But patient care and paying attention to the mysteries of plant growth have helped my dad stay healthy and focused. He is minimally wired with e-mail and cell phone; his attention is elsewhere, turning green things into beauty or flavor.

Singing

I stumbled almost by accident into a choir of about 3,000 voices singing in a huge hallway of the Convention Center in Charlotte, North Carolina. Mennonite Church USA and Canada had gathered for their national conventions. One afternoon, anyone interested was invited to join a “hymn sing.” I arrived late but within seconds was enraptured by the sound of voices, unadorned with instrumentation, filling the space to overflowing.

I joined in and looked around. All the ages were there, from gray heads to

glass beads. Soprano, tenor, alto, and bass mixed in rich harmony. The resonance off steel, glass, and concrete echoed like a medieval cathedral.

A few folks took out their cell phones to share the moment with distant friends. But the contrast to our techno digital driven, iPod personal world of music consumption could hardly have been sharper. Simple human voices creating beauty together. At the finish, an acquaintance said to me, “Maybe there’s hope for the church after all.”

Learning to sing doesn’t come by listening to the din of recorded music. We learn to sing by paying attention to live voices around us, then tentatively adding ours—imitating, learning to read the dots and lines on the page, listening carefully, seeking to help create beauty.

I wonder what will happen to the sense of community Mennonites or any other traditions committed to singing share if we no longer take the trouble to teach children, newcomers, and guests how to use the voice in vigorous song. The sound in the convention hallway gives me hope that many are still learning music the old-fashioned way—singing with others.

Sharing Meals

We are not a large family, just two daughters and two parents. Still our schedules can be terribly difficult to align. Softball practice, play rehearsal, evening meetings, grocery shopping. The list is as expansive as it is relentless in its pressure to take us in four different directions—four people sleeping under the same roof but all marching

to their own preoccupations and habits. Continuous partial attention. We do it with people too, even the ones we love dearly.

Something out of the ordinary happens, however, when we sit down and eat a meal together. For a few moments, we stop moving, working, and surfing. We sit, eat, and talk. We talk about the encounters and activities of the day. We become present with each other, face to face. The dinner table is much more than an intersection where we park our bodies to refuel. It becomes a canopy for relational communion and repair.

Sabbath-Keeping

The biblical concept of Sabbath draws a direct connection between rest and paying attention to God. A worship teacher I once heard, however, made a strong point about the link between work and worship. Worship and service and work all used to be part of the same whole. There was no canyon between Sabbath worship and the rest of the week. He had a point. Worship and Sabbath rest are not sacred moments cut off from the marketplace.

But I suspect that most of us today have the opposite problem. In a wired world, there is often little or no boundary between Sabbath and the other six days of the week. Thus I am more fascinated by the connection not between worship and work, but between worship and rest as Sabbath-keeping. There is an old proverb to the effect that Sabbath slows our bodies down enough for our souls to catch up.

Ellen Goodman touched a sore spot with her column about mailing a letter the old-fashioned way. That fed into my emotions fresh from touring a few time-tested treasures of Lancaster County with dear friends.

Add to that the hurry and scurry of a recent move and starting a new job, and you begin to catch a glimpse of the personal backdrop of this

piece. I'm betting, though, that others probably know the terrain pretty well too.

—*Mark R. Wenger, Lancaster, Pa, recently moved from a 10-year pastorate in Waynesboro, Virginia, to assume responsibilities as Director of Pastoral Studies for Eastern Mennonite Seminary at Lancaster.*

Lessons

“And what do people do when they have a date?” I asked one who was older and wiser in the ways of *rum springa*.

“You lie down like this, put your arms around him like so,” she instructed.

“Just like the pigs!” I snorted, amazed that human activities find their parallel on our family farm.

So when a visiting “Pequaer” asked me out, I was ready. After the singin’ at John Bylers’ we two, joined by my brother and his date, bundled in their big bed upstairs — four across —

like cigars lyin’ in a box waitin’ for a light.

Took but a few moments for the animal beside me to commence, shiftin’ himself to the position that unleashed my foot to let go a mighty kick, pitchin’ him onto the floor into the cold.

“Let’s go home!” I hissed to my brother.

So without a word, he left his gal of brief acquaintance and marched with me up the long lane through the seething night.

—*Esther Yoder Stenson*

Planning for Spontaneity

Renee Gehman

We had just arrived in Dushore, Pennsylvania—home of the only traffic light in Sullivan County. Now in the kitchen of our family cabin my parents and I stood in that moment after a long car ride where you feel compelled to plant your feet in one place and just be.

Compulsion soon relieved, I asked my dad for an estimated time of departure for dinner in town. Well, apparently my dad was still in his moment, and I had interrupted him, because he threw up his hands and said, “Renee—when I come up here, I don’t *plan* anything.” Then he proceeded to tell me about a recent TV special regarding the correlation between families who pack their schedules full and families who produce “troubled” teenagers.

I knew I was too old to become a troubled teenager, and I wasn’t convinced that bodily nourishment counted as an activity that contributes to the corruption of families. Of course, my dad wasn’t implying either of these things; he merely wanted to point out that not every hour of a person’s life needs to be planned out. Organized life does not always equal good life. Sane life—yes. Boring life—quite possibly.

Lived-deeply-with-all-the-marrow-sucked-out-life—probably not. To have a plan is practical and comforting, but the ability to be spontaneous is a healthy and necessary skill in this wonderful world of inconstancy.

There are those who are naturally spontaneous; others, such as myself, need to have spontaneous activity practically forced upon them through mockery and other methods of insult. My friend Ryan is from Spain, where people are generally very laid back, very flexible. Whenever Ryan would suggest something to do without giving me at least a week's notice, my tendency was to decline, usually because it would mean rearranging the schedule I had just written out by the hour for the next five days.

One night Ryan flat out told me that I was *incapable* of being spontaneous. Shocked and offended (and very much in denial), I responded with, "Well can you do something spontaneous two Saturdays from now? We don't have to plan what it is, we'll just wait for the day and then do something random." To which Ryan argued that an event doesn't qualify as spontaneous when scheduled to occur two weeks in advance.

Then I surprised us both by challenging him to accompany me on a drive up to Maine. Neither of us had ever been to Maine, we had always wanted to go, and here I was, unflex-

ible Renee, ready to embark on a bonafide spontaneous road trip at 9:45 at night. So off we went, without even a map to guide us, figuring Maine is north of Massachusetts, so we'd just drive north.

There are those who are naturally spontaneous, while others (such as myself) need to have spontaneous activity practically forced on them through mockery and other methods of insult.

Indeed, within a couple of hours we spontaneously came upon a road sign that read, "Maine—the way life *should* be." Unfortunately for us, life the way it should be turned out to mean all businesses closed by 11:30 p.m. and everyone in bed resting up for another day of correct living. However, we did find a nice beach to walk along before heading back, and all in all it was an evening well spent.

Alas, that refreshingly liberating act of spontaneity was perhaps not as life-altering for me as it should have been. Even now, as I type this article, I look to the left of me and there are two lists—one an inventory of everything I'd like to get done today, and the other a more detailed second draft of the first:

- 6:30 clean room;
- 7:00 pick out two of six hymns for Sunday;
- 7:30 breakfast;
- 8:00 work on column;
- 8:45 hem dress.

And this goes on until 6:45 in the evening, at which point I allow myself a choice of three options for the rest of my Saturday night.

I *like* my lists. Crossing items off a list gives me a sense of accomplishment, and completing a list empowers me with the sensation of being in control. And it is a good feeling but also something I feel compelled to relinquish as of late. As Proverbs 19:21 puts it, "Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails." Which is bad news for my aspirations to have it all figured out but good news when I consider who really *does* have it all figured out.

So what to do when I am too busy following my schedule to remember this good news? What to do when I find myself insisting on knowing the way things are supposed to play out? Now back at school, I consider the décor of my living space and am seriously contemplating the construction of a sign for my wall that reads: "Don't forget to be spontaneous." Or maybe "Spontaneity is the spice of life."

Of course such a dangerous little reminder could potentially lead to a crazy night when I close all my textbooks and have a snowball fight with complete strangers . . . or jump in the pond . . . or stay up past midnight

drinking hot chocolate and pleasure-reading. But at least it could make me more flexible with my time.

And the more flexibility I allow for in my schedule, the easier it is for me to give up my need to have the next hour, the next day, and the next five years planned out.

And as I begin to accept little moments of spontaneity here and there, as I release my grip on the wheel that guides me through my life, it becomes easier for me to remember and find comfort in this promise from God—"For I know the plans I have for you . . . plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

After all, giving God the wheel is the most practical way to be spontaneous. And so long as God is in charge, I think I can be flexible.

But I do still want to know when I'm eating dinner.

—Renee Gehman, Souderton, Pennsylvania, is a senior at Gordon College in Wenham, Massachusetts, and assistant editor of DreamSeeker Magazine.



Church and Pop Culture

Or Why I Read Harry Potter

Laura Lehman Amstutz

I was introduced to the world of Muggles and magic in college. One of my friends was an aspiring author and wanted to steal author J. K. Rowling's secrets. And with these friends, if one of us has read it, we all have to read it.

This is how I found myself standing sheepishly in line at 11:35 p.m. on July 15, 2005, waiting for the newest installment of Rowling's series. If I hadn't had friends who worked in both major chain bookstores in town, I probably would have skipped the event and gotten it the next day, but friendship again decreed that I be a part of the um, magic.

And it was sort of magical. Adults and children dressed in costumes, getting things painted on their faces, and the bookstore decked out in Harry Potter-esque scenery. All of this for a book was quite amazing.

As a seminary student and an aspiring pastor, I admit my addiction to Harry Potter quite reluctantly. The church has never had a good relationship with pop icons, particularly those that suggest something beyond what is logical or something that may be construed as evil. Most popular culture is somehow con-

nected to art, and Mennonites, like many Protestants, have a somewhat rocky relationship with things artistic.

Or perhaps the church is just jealous of the attention that popular icons receive in a world where we feel we are largely losing ground. Either way, most churches would not subscribe to reading Harry Potter, over say, *The Purpose-Driven Life*. But perhaps we should.

If we look carefully at those things that become popular in our culture, we may, as my friend suggested in college, be able to steal their secrets. So what are the secrets locked inside what has affectionately been called Harry Potter mania? I have a few suggestions, and perhaps astute readers can come to some conclusions of their own.

First and foremost, the Harry Potter phenomenon is about *imagination*. It is about a world that does not exist . . . but could. The Potter books are written in a language that is understandable, but it pushes the imagination beyond what seems completely possible. The story is a fantastic one.

So what can the church learn? Well, we also have a fantastic story, full of people and things so astonishing that you have to have faith to believe them. We have stories about people who lived in the desert, or inside of a fish, or on a lone boat in a world covered in water, and the most fantastic story we have is that the

greatest Being in the universe chose to come to us as a baby and teach us and die for us.

We have a great story, but we get caught in the logic and forget that what it really takes is imagination to make our story come alive.

Second, Harry Potter can help us see that *we don't need to sugarcoat the world*. As Rowling's novels increase in number, they increase in intensity. They become darker, but as in all good things, the darkness does not snuff out the light. The Harry

Potter novels aren't afraid to admit that there is evil in the world, a lesson most of us have learned by now, with terrorist attacks and war lurking at every turn.

As the characters of Harry Potter will tell you, it is not just adults who face death and darkness in the world, even teenagers and young people must make adult decisions and face the darkness. When we deny the existence of true darkness in the world, we deny the reality that people live in. Then we become the opposite of stewards; we become irrelevant.

And in Harry Potter, as in the Christian story, good does defeat evil, but it is a long hard battle usually championed by unexpected and sometimes unwilling people. Yet we remember that our own story also has several unwilling and unlikely characters, like Moses, Jacob, John the Baptist, and a young girl named Mary.

In Harry Potter, as in the Christian story, good does defeat evil, but it is a long hard battle usually championed by unexpected and sometimes unwilling people.

Another surprising twist in Rowling's latest novel (don't worry, I won't give away any secrets) is that Harry's only weapon to defeat the evil in the world, much to Harry's dismay, is love. The greatest of all is love.

Finally, at the suggestion of my friend who wanted to steal Rowling's secrets, Harry Potter *teaches tolerance*. Good people of the world come in all shapes and sizes. In Harry's world, those who ask to be respected come from parents who aren't magical. Since they don't have a legacy in the magical world, they are sometimes called names or excluded. But the good people in Harry's world accept those without magical heritage.

In our world, we are called to love, respect, and ask for help from those who don't usually fit our mold. And perhaps we can even cull the depths of

popular icons and discover the secrets behind what our culture loves.

Do I think Harry Potter should replace the Bible? Certainly not! But perhaps it can teach us something about relevance and the culture we live in. It, and other popular icons, can teach us what society longs for, and what it needs. Magical possibilities lie within our own sacred book, and the Bible can speak to the needs of society. The church just needs to learn the language.

—*Laura Lehman Amstutz, Harrisonburg, Virginia, is a seminary student at Eastern Mennonite Seminary. She has been a long-time fan of fiction of all types, but is particularly interested in fantasy/sci-fi and the critique it can provide for culture and the church.*



Jonny Come Lately

Noël R. King

Jonny wrote story after story. It was his favorite thing to do. In fact, he could never seem to get quite enough of it. He would finish one story and be filled with yearning to start another one right this minute. So off he'd go again.

As you can imagine, with this kind of impetus/desire/whatever you want to call it, Jonny's stories piled up like, well, like a huge pile of stories sitting on his desk. (He much preferred pen and paper over computers or even typewriters.)

So we know that Jonny wrote *lots* of stories. He was all but addicted to it. That is a little strange in and of itself, but even stranger was the fact that they were never more than a single page long. Just when you thought a story was really going somewhere, you would come to the end of the doggone thing. Oh, it was infuriating to his readers! To be led on like that only to be crashed into a brick wall of an ending!

Well, they—the readers—complained mightily to Jonny about his short, abruptly ending stories. You might be surprised that he even had any readers left at this point, but he did. He did because his stories were so compelling. It was difficult to see a new story by Jonny and *not* read it. It took a hardy person or a really

mean, bad person to be able to pass by one of Jonny's stories without stopping to read it.

So they kept reading; they kept complaining, too, though, asking Jonny how he could be so cruel to them, so hard-hearted as to give them such a lurch each and every time.

Jonny, after listening quietly to his complainers, would just smile and tell them he was sorry, but that's just the way it was. The complainers would slouch away, vowing to never again read one of his stories, only to compulsively break down even before the week was out.

The truth of it was that Jonny was scared silly whenever he wrote, even as at the same time he felt so compelled to write and write and write. He was scared silly that his pen would just take off without him, or, more accurately, without his consent. He was scared silly that he would get trapped in his own stories, that his words would just drag him right in. Drag him to where? Oh, that's just the point! He had no idea—that's what scared him so.

Part of him longed to just let go and let it happen, to let a story take him over, to see what that would be like, but the bigger, scarer part of him made darn sure he always

stopped just in time. Hence the bruising, slamming-into-the-wall sorts of endings.

As for the word *muse*, which somebody once made the mistake of mentioning to Jonny, he tried to avoid it at all costs. He hated the word; it filled him with terror. Weren't muses the creatures that ripped you out of your own safe, little life and into their incomprehensible, terrifyingly unpredictable realms? He knew it was silly, really, that there were no such things as muses. Still . . . He was going to make darn sure he stayed away from them, real or not.

Jonny told me all this, confidentially of course, late one night at a party about 10 years ago. I am breaking that confidence now, as you can plainly see for yourself, because I heard something last week that sent shivers down my spine.

Somebody told me, having no idea what they were *really* telling me, that Jonny has been hard at work, nonstop now for the last three years, on a novel! Oh boy. I better stop now and lay down this pen. This is scaring me silly.

—As circumstances warrant, through her Turquoise Pen column Noël R. King, South Riding, Virginia, reports on strange and wonderful things, including being scared silly.

He was scared silly that he would get trapped in his own stories, that his words would just drag him right in.

So What Do You Do?

Deborah Good

“My prayers are with you.” The man had approached me from across the restaurant where I sat with a good friend. He looked me straight in the eyes and put his hand on my shoulder. “My prayers are with you,” he repeated.

Did I know this man? I quickly sifted through the files in my brain. This sort of thing had happened to me several times recently. I was in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, where just about every third person, it seemed, went to church with some relative of mine and, as a result, knew the hard news about my dad: He was gone, taken by cancer on July 13, 2005.

“What is wrong with you?” the man asked me. “Are you ill?” He placed the palm of his hand against my forehead, checking for a fever.

I was quite sure by this point that I did not recognize him at all. And his smile told me that he probably did not know about my father's recent death and that he was joking about something else entirely. I looked helplessly at Rus who sat across the table from me, laughing.

The middle-aged man, as it turned out, was someone Rus knew. The man was implying that I needed

prayer only because I was spending my time with the likes of his younger friend who sat across from me. He slid into the booth next to me, chatting with Rus about baseball and the coming football season.

Simple interactions with acquaintances and complete strangers have become challenging in a new way since my dad's death. Over and over again, when I meet someone at a wedding or soccer game, I have to decide whether they already know, and if not, whether I am going to *tell them*.

The other day, I met someone at a party and our conversation was not unlike many I've had before. I asked her about her life, her work, her plans to go to school. She asked me about myself:

"So what do you do?"

"Well, I'm actually between jobs at the moment, but I'm looking for work here in Philadelphia." I pause. The truth is, I am still living in Washington, D.C., with my mom, helping with the myriad transitions and tasks that one faces after losing a loved one to cancer. I haven't lived in Philadelphia for six months. I hope to move back soon and am interviewing for jobs there, but without mentioning my dad's death, I am saying very little about my life. "I've actually been in D.C. for about six months," I tell her, "helping out with . . . some family stuff."

Some family stuff? Huh. The conversation moved on and this new ac-

quaintance did not pry. Our interaction was, overall, light-hearted and enjoyable, but—partly because of my choice to keep my huge weight hidden—shallow.

Other times I have chosen to share the hard news, even with strangers. Death is a part of life, after all, and the experience of losing a family member is almost universal. I get different reactions. Everyone, of course, is very sorry. Some have their own stories to tell. One young man I met while waiting for our carryout orders in a local restaurant actually looked to be blinking back tears.

Others, however, shift their weight slightly and pause uncomfortably. *Oh*, they seem to say awkwardly.

She just said something very personal and very sad. I immediately feel like I've done something inappropriate, as though I've yelled profanity in church and should have kept my mouth shut.

I am observing that there are certain things most people do not often throw into small talk. Apparently, one of these is death. I'm guessing heartbreak, money problems, and mental illness fall into the same category.

And yet I am not completely satisfied with this rulebook for interaction (a book, by the way, that I never received). It seems ridiculous that we are expected to keep some of the most common and most significant experiences of our lives so private, when perhaps what we most need is the support and wisdom of everyone we meet—enough to fill the gaps in our own

portfolio, enough to spill over into our loneliest and most helpless moments.

I am usually a very open person, yet I have started to err on the side of privacy, sharing my huge, weighty experience only when it seems most appropriate. In so doing, I spare my conversation partners the discomfort and burden of helping me navigate my way through this fog of grief and gratitude.

Maybe what I'm really doing is letting our culture's great denial of death limit me and my conversations. We seem to think, *If we don't talk about it, maybe it doesn't exist.*

Well, my friends, I am here to remind us all that death does exist. I now know death more intimately than I ever have before. I have reached my hands in under my dad's back to where I could still feel warmth, even after his hands and feet were going cold. I have walked down a church aisle with my mother, both of us dressed in black. I have missed him every day since.

I am also here to say that talking about death actually makes it easier to bear. My dad lived with its looming reality for the five and a half months between his diagnosis and his final breath, and his openness through the whole experience changed us all. "It

just helps to talk through these things," he would often say, "to get them out of my head."

This morning I woke up on the couch my parents bought together two years ago, in my childhood home. I got on my bike and headed down the wooded path where Dad once taught me to ride. The path led to a grassy area between the Jefferson and Korean War memorials, and there a group of us played a soccer game. I met some new people and told them I was moving to Philly in two weeks. I did not tell anyone what had brought me back to the D.C. area six months ago.

Four of us biked back together, nearly soaked in the humidity. We talked about this and that, laughed, then went our separate ways. I parked my bike in the basement and went upstairs, happy with my morning, and knowing that, when I reached the top of the stairs, Dad would not be there to hear all about it.

—*Deborah Good, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, plans to spend much of her next year writing and working part-time, though she now understands life is not as predictable as she once thought. She can be reached at deborahagood@gmail.com.*



Struggles of a Flawed Superhero

A Review of “Batman Begins”

David Greiser

I had plenty of reasons *not* to go and see “Batman Begins.”

In the first place, there was the campy 1960s TV series starring Adam West as a lovable goofball in spandex. While I loved Batman as a 12-year-old, I could hardly imagine myself spending two hours in a theater watching “Biff!—Pow!—Ouch!” today.

Similarly, the narrative arc of the “Batman” films of the 1990s had devolved from a promising beginning to a campy, car-crash-laced ending in which the only interesting characters were the leering, cartoonish bad guys (Jack Nicholson, Danny DeVito, and—gasp—Arnold Schwarzenegger). Why go to a film whose title seemed to promise only the origins of this silly story?

Clear from your mind any of the old Batman images. “Batman Begins” is *truly* an entirely new beginning. It is not a prequel to the cheesy ’90s movies or the cheesier TV series. Credit this thoughtful restart to director Christopher Nolan, who created the highly original mind-benders “Memento” (2000) and “Insomnia” (2002).

Nolan’s vision of “Batman” actually aims to recapture the original story of the dark, flawed, and mysterious superhero of the 1940s comic books. The original Batman is psychologically complex, haunted by memories, making up his life of crime fighting as he goes along, unsure of his role as a vigilante for justice.

Actor Christian Bale portrays the flawed superhero with a brooding depth. Though there is no way this character or this tale can be termed “realistic,” Bale plays it with a seriousness that helps us to suspend our disbelief. The film itself is dark and shadowy, with special effects taking a back seat to fog and silhouettes.

Comic book aficionados already know the details of the Batman legend. For the uninitiated (which includes me—I had to do research), Batman is the alter ego of Bruce Wayne, a wealthy playboy with a dark past. As an eight-year-old, Wayne saw his parents murdered by a mugger in Gotham City (a New York City look-alike, though the movie was actually filmed in Chicago). Shortly before this, he fell into a cave where he was emotionally scarred by the flight of some bats (hence the choice of the bat character).

As a young adult, Wayne was inexplicably held in a brutal Asian prison camp. Here Bruce met a mentor, the mysterious Henri Ducard (Liam Neeson), who trains him in the mental disciplines of the martial

arts and tries to recruit him for the vigilante-terrorist organization “The League of Shadows.”

The League fights terror with terror. When Wayne learns that he will be required to kill and to internalize the evil that he wants to destroy to become a member of the League, he refuses membership and opts instead to create the double life of a vigilante who fights evil with a good heart. He will learn that it is harder than it looks.

Returning to Gotham, Wayne begins to create his crime-fighting character. Aided by his faithful butler Alfred (played with wise sympathy by Michael Caine), his childhood friend-turned D.A. Rachel Dawes (Katie Holmes), and police scientist Lucius Fox (Morgan Freeman), Wayne gradually learns that Gotham City is controlled by a collection of forces so corrupt that the mafia is only the beginners’ level on the criminal totem pole. Beyond the mob, there are evil corporate executives, bad cops, mad psychiatrists, and a host of other ugly people and psychic nightmares.

I could delve deeper into the plot, but I won’t spoil some of the nice surprises and twists that emerge along the way. The larger ideas in the film deserve note. “Batman Begins” continues the theme of commingled good and evil forces found in films like the original “Star Wars” trilogy and the “Matrix” films. Are good and evil powers ever absolute? Not in the

Are good and evil powers ever absolute? Not in the “Batman” worldview. . . . The evil that Batman would fight is not only external—it is within him as well.

“Batman” worldview. The League of Shadows fights evil by becoming evil itself. The evil that Batman would fight is not only external—it is within him as well.

The moral canvas on which this film takes shape is one that is influenced by the ethical monism of Eastern thought but also, one could argue, by Augustinian thinking about original sin. There are bad guys, but no unequivocally good guys.

“Batman Begins” is a feast for lovers of myth and students of psychology. It is a deeply American myth in at least two ways. The theme of the individual vigilante who simultaneously fights crime and his inner demons is an echo of the American Western novel and film. This theme has made its way through stories as diverse as “High Noon” and “Dirty Harry.”

“Batman Begins” is also a story that continues the longstanding bias Americans have had against cities. In American mythology, cities are usually manifestations of the evil side of

human nature. Gotham City looks sleek and beautiful, but its people are the personification of greed and corruption.

Viewers may notice that it is always night-time in Gotham City. Psychologists will have fun with the archetypal images of bats and the batcave (which is a real cave in this film and not a high-tech play room as on the TV series.) The Batman persona comes to life deep within the bowels of the earth, and deep within the subconscious of Bruce Wayne.

The conclusion of the “Batman Begins” includes a strong hint of a sequel to follow. If subsequent stories are as thoughtfully told as this one is, I may finally become a fan of the superhero genre—or at least of the Caped Crusader.

—David Greiser preaches at Souderton Mennonite Church, Souderton, PA, and teaches preaching at Palmer Seminary in Philadelphia. Recently he has begun facing his inner fear of heights by skydiving



Absolute Truth and Loving Enemies

Michael A. King

Terrorists attack. They attack apparently because they believe America has done terrible things to their people, that God is on their side blessing them, and that they are justified in killing thousands of people because they are right. God bless the terrorists' cause.

A country must decide how to respond. A president draws a line. He tells nations around the world that they must choose which side of the line to stand on. They must decide between right and wrong, and America's side is the right side.

Many Americans then become indignant at the very idea that it could be wrong for the American response to be killing far more innocent people in Afghanistan and in Iraq than were killed on 9-11. War is a messy business, this war against terror must be fought, and we are right. God bless America.

Mennonites, members of other Historic Peace Churches, and peace-loving people in general must decide how to respond. Some conclude that because Jesus taught us to love enemies there is only one right way forward: that is the way of peace. Any use of force is wrong. If more innocent people die due to terrorist attacks, that is the way it must be, because peace is a

messy business, the way of peace must be affirmed, and we are right. God bless our understanding of peace.

In each of these three cases, people believe 1) in absolute truth; 2) that God is on their side and the one who guarantees the absoluteness of their truth; and 3) that if necessary they are prepared to die for their beliefs and prepared for others to die for these beliefs.

Here I want to explore dangers of commitment to absolute truth in the way each of these three groups understand and apply it.

I don't assume a worst case outcome; God is still at work, tempering our human ability to destroy each other. But neither do I rule out the worst case, which would be for each view of absolute truth to become ever more rigid and for each side, particularly of those who believe that force is acceptable, to justify ever more terrible violence because when you are right, you are right, and you must do what you must do.

Now one response I've heard to this situation is that as terrible as the combat between absolute truths is, there is one big difference between our truth and theirs: ours is really right—and theirs is really wrong.

What do you suppose they would say about this? Surely many of them, when pondering the great danger of clashing truths, must conclude that the one big difference is that we're re-

ally wrong, even though we think we're right—whereas they're really right.

Oh, but if our truth is in Jesus Christ, then at last the debate is over. We're right. No. When religions are at war, that solves nothing. If I know Jesus Christ was a great prophet, but that the greatest was Muhammad, why would I believe the discussion ends with Jesus?

So how then should we handle absolute truth at a time when using it against each other could end the world? I propose five brief points.

(1) Let no one hear me deny that there is absolute truth. I believe there is. I understand Jesus as revealed in the Bible to be the rock of absolute truth on which we stand.

(2) But absolute truth is fully known only to God. Every time humans claim to know it trouble, and often tragedy, results. This is what we're seeing now. We need to find a way to trust in God's absolute truth without claiming we fully know it ourselves.

(3) I believe we see within the Bible's handling of war and peace that what we understand God is telling us about absolute truth can change over time. Exodus 21 quotes the Lord himself as saying to Moses, "If any harm follows, you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe."

Cut to Jesus in Matthew 5. "You have heard that it was said," starts Je-

sus. Wow! We just heard who said it. God said it, according to Exodus. But Jesus, son of God, now teaches, "You have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye. . . . But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. . . . Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you."

Wow. Something dramatic is going on here. Two absolute truths. Both from God. Now what? There are many ways of handling this tension between Exodus and Matthew 5, and in a column on the dangers of absolute truth I surely won't aim to give an absolute word. But here is how I put this all together: God's ways are always above ours. We never fully understand what God is trying to tell us. God works with us, over time, step by step, helping us grow in understanding the divine ways.

The God Exodus portrays is actually doing something more radical than we may realize. Back then indiscriminate and brutal wholesale killing was common. Exodus puts limits on it. Back then God says, only so much violence and no more. Let what you do to the evildoer be no more than what has been done to you.

This was already so radical it was likely all people in those days could handle. If we doubt how radical it was, ponder the countless Americans, many of them Christians, who said our response to 9-11 should be swift, sure, overwhelming, and, get this, *disproportionate*. To scare them to death, we should do *more* to them than was done to us, maybe a thousand lives for each eye. So simply to apply the Exodus word of the Lord today, never

mind what Jesus says, remains a big move.

Jesus gives us more of the limit on violence and the highlighting of love God was setting in motion in Exodus. We get closer here to God's absolute truth. But do we now own it? No, no more than did the people of God in Exodus times. If they faithfully followed everything God commanded in Exodus, they still barely glimpsed truths Jesus would teach. We are not somehow exempted from that situation and ourselves given all truth. As the apostle Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 13, now we see only dimly; only then, only at the end of our earthly journey, will we know fully.

(4) That leads to my fourth point, which is that Mennonites or other peacemakers committed to love of enemies are not exempt from falling into trouble through blind commitment to absolute truth. Our temptation is to believe that in standing on Matthew 5 we finally can claim to know absolute truth. I say no.

What Jesus teaches is one of the greatest truths we can know. We *should* be willing to die for it. Countless conscientious objectors to war in World War I were imprisoned by the U.S. government when they said that to obey Jesus they must love rather than kill enemies. Countless more during wars since have declared themselves conscientious objectors and entered ministry in hospitals, jails, areas of poverty and need. They are the heroes I hope Christians will imitate. (See more on them in Daniel Hertzer's column, this issue.)

But: This doesn't mean Christians committed to a way of peace indebted to Matthew 5 now know absolute truth and can simply tell governments they must apply for membership in one of the Historic Peace Churches. Jesus is teaching his followers, not necessarily the government, to love enemies. When the New Testament speaks directly about governing authorities, as in Romans 13, God is said to give the government the sword to discipline evildoers.

I do hope and pray that over time love of peace will deepen around the globe, and that governments will increasingly understand how easily—as we appear to be seeing in Afghanistan and Iraq—efforts to restrain evil with force simply breed more evil. I hope that governments will truly come to see force as the tool of very last resort, not simply give lip service to it. I hope governments will someday invest the billions in peace they always somehow seem more ready to invest in war and truly give peace a chance rather than pretending to do so to clear the decks for war.

And yet. . . . And yet. Can peace lovers be sure that if, say, millions of people in Philadelphia someday face nuclear attack, we know enough about what God wants at that moment to insist the government simply love whoever is preparing to vaporize an entire city? Can we be sure God does not in-

tend government to be a divine tool for restraining such evil? I say no.

I say that instead of being so sure of absolute truth that we are willing either to kill or let others be killed for it, our calling is to learn what it means to live another of Jesus' teachings in

Those of us committed to the way of peace need to include as "enemies" to be loved not only such enemies as our country fights but also those warmaking Christians we tend to see as our enemies.

Matthew 7, which is "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged." For if we treat the other as enemy, we can expect to be treated as enemy. If we treat the other as wrong, we can expect to be seen as wrong. If I think I have the truth but not you, I can expect you to turn the same attitude against me.

(5) That leads to my final point, which is that our challenge as growing Christians is to learn how to be simultaneously so committed to the truth to the extent we understand it that we would be willing to die for it—yet at the same time humbly accept that only God knows absolute truth.

I believe it is possible to be so committed to God's truth that we die for it yet still realize that commitment to loving enemies and not judging includes never through weapons or words killing our enemies with our absolute truth. Instead we are to love our enemies, and one reason we need to do so is because the way they see the world may help us understand aspects of God's truth we are too blinded by the log in our own viewpoint to grasp.

To guard against our own blindness, those of us committed to the

way of peace need to include as "enemies" to be loved not only such enemies as our country fights but also those warmaking Christians we tend to see as our enemies.

To guard against their blindnesses, Christians quick to support resisting evildoers with the sword but slow to hear Jesus telling them to resist not evil need these peacemaking convictions: Governments, fallible as they all are, prone to use their power to aggrandize themselves rather than truly restrain evil, prone to shade or hide or twist the truth whenever it calls them to account, have no license to wield even their possibly legitimate swords without restraint. And what-

ever the state does, Christians are to model a new way.

To guard against our mutual blindnesses, Christians and Muslims and others quick to see the violent thorns in each other's sacred scriptures and histories need each other's help to see the log in our own. Then instead of getting back judgment, hate, and death, we may get back from the other the same humble readiness to learn from us that we have offered them.

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



Mennonite Peace Witness, Then and Now

Daniel Hertzler

As disciples of Christ, we do not prepare for war or participate in war or military service,” says *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (82).

In 1942 my father’s hired man was drafted and Dad declared that I should quit school and help on the farm. So when I became of draft age, I was deferred to work on the farm. I have no personal Civilian Public Service stories to tell.

But I have examined the literature and find the CPS era as well as the following eras quite well-documented. This is a review of U.S. Mennonite response to militarism through three eras: From CPS through the I-W period (I-W was what the selective service classified conscientious objectors, or COs) to the present efforts of Christian Peacemaker Teams and Conflict Transformation Programs.

A basic source for the CPS story is Melvin Gingerich’s *Service for Peace* (Herald Press, 1949). It reports that CPS extended from May 1941 to March 1947 and that nearly 12,000 men served in it. Of these, 4665 or 38 percent were Mennonites (1).

Gingerich recounts detail by detail how conscription came about and how the church responded. He reports that according to a Mennonite Central Committee census “of Mennonite men inducted before December 1, 1944 . . . 45.9 percent went into CPS, 14.5 percent into noncombatant military service (1-A-O) and 39.6 percent took regular military service” (90).

CPS appears to have been a marriage of (in)convenience for the peace churches and the government. For both it had the appeal of an organized program. They knew where the men would be and could monitor their activities. But neither side was really happy with the arrangement. For the government, the COs were an annoyance. The churches were disappointed to find the program coming under the direction of Selective Service.

To present a united front to the government, the peace churches organized what was to become the National Service Board for Religious Objectors (56). President Roosevelt turned down flat the first proposal negotiated with representatives of Selective Service. It would have provided several options for the men, one of which would have included wages.

The record of these negotiations suggests that when push comes to shove the government generally wins. “The churches now faced a problem they had not expected. Were their young men to work without pay on projects completely government ad-

ministered or were they to work without pay in church administered camps?” (57). Gingerich asks, “Why were the churches willing to finance the program?” He suggests two answers.

CPS appears to have been a marriage of (in)convenience for the peace churches and the government.

For one, the money for wages was clearly not available for camps not administered by the government. Secondly, as Paul Comly French put it, “The fact that people believe in anything sufficiently to pay for it has worth in making our testimony clear in a society in which material things are predominant and the basis on which values are judged”

(60).

Among the other ambiguities facing the churches were two questions growing out of a phrase in a recommendation by a Senate committee “that if the objector is found to be conscientiously opposed to participation in . . . noncombatant service, that he should be assigned to work of national importance under civilian direction” (49). Who would be ultimately in charge and how to define “work of national importance” were issues never resolved to the satisfaction of the churches and numbers of the draftees.

The issue is addressed by Albert Keim and Grant Stoltzfus in *The Politics of Conscience* (Herald Press, 1955). As they report, CPS developed from Executive Order 8675, signed by the president on Feb. 6, 1941. This order gave “the Selective Service Director

authority to determine work of national importance, assign men to camps, and supervise and equip and regulate the process" (114). It was some time before church leaders understood how comprehensive the role of Selective Service would be.

On the one hand, General Lewis B. Hershey, administrator of CPS, favored the plan and generally responded favorably to church administrators. On the other hand, his true feelings evidently appeared in 1943 testimony before a House committee. He said, "The conscientious objector, by my theory, is best handled if no one hears of him" (118). A deputy of Hershey's, Colonel Louis Kosch, told Quaker Tom Jones, "My dear man, the draft is under United States government operation. Conscientious objectors are draftees just as soldiers are. The peace churches are only camp managers" (119).

A perspective on the CPS experience turned up in a pamphlet prepared by the National Service Board for Religious Objectors, a copy of which I found in a secondhand store. Of interest are the instructions, especially these, on what to bring to camp: "Do not bring too many supplies. They will be a burden. This clothing need NOT BE NEW. . . . All clothing and bed linens should be marked by the owner's name.

"Be sure to bring your sugar ration card."

Gingerich describes in some detail the varieties of work CPS men did while in service. Numbers of them

were able to transfer from base camps to more satisfying work, such as in mental hospitals. He reports that over 1500 men served in mental hospitals

where MCC was in charge of the units.

The men responded to this work in a variety of ways, but one response found in the files was this: "I would consider the hospital work by far the most significant

work I did while in CPS. There is something about seeing a demented person returned to normalcy which raised a lump in your throat and you grope for words to express it" (247).

The military draft in the United States had a brief pause after World War II but was soon activated again. As recounted by Keim and Stoltzfus, in 1948 President Harry Truman asked for a new draft only a year after the 1940 act expired. The bill, signed in June 1948, exempted conscientious objectors.

In 1950 this law was up for renewal at the start of the Korean War. The pressure of war and occasional bad publicity threatened the deferred status of COs. By 1951 the 1948 act was amended to call for conscientious objectors "to perform . . . such civilian work contributing to the maintenance of a national health, safety and interest as the local board may deem appropriate'. The Korean War had destroyed deferment. Alternative service was the law" (139).

The new alternative service would not be CPS. Neither Selective Service nor the churches wanted any more

camps. The Friends would not cooperate with the program, but the Church of the Brethren and the Mennonites agreed to do so.

What developed was the I-W program which "began operating officially in 1952" (144). Also, "Most I-Ws accepted low-level jobs in health facilities. . . . By 1954 more than 80 percent of all I-Ws held hospital jobs" (145). Keim and Stoltzfus report general satisfaction with the program. However, "The men sometimes melted into their settings without any special witness about who they were or what they stood for" (146).

A research paper entitled "An Overview of the Mennonite I-W Program" by Dirk W. Eitzen and Timothy R. Falb (1980) was prepared for the MCC Peace Section and is more articulate about the problems. It suggests that the government was satisfied and the young men were satisfied, but church leaders became more and more unhappy. As a point of reference, the paper indicates that from 1952 to 1975 "about 15,000 Mennonite and Brethren in Christ participated in the program" (1).

In contrast to CPS, where the men were ordered into camps, I-W men were scattered about the country, and church organizations had difficulty finding and relating to them, particularly men who did not wish to be "pastored." Eitzen and Falb conclude that "On the one hand, some men were lost to the Church and the peace witness was sullied by inconsistent behavior. On the other, churches sprang up in unexpected places as I-W scattered the men and their testimony to

nonresistant Christianity across the continent" (22).

Recently, Michael Horst wrote a paper at Eastern Mennonite University entitled "The 1950s I-W Program: Spirituality and the Challenge for the Church to Be Involved." He did extensive interviews with former I-Ws and also reviewed publications put out by the units. He concluded that "This wasn't a service that really required the men to look into their hearts and stand up for their pacifist beliefs." Yet, he writes, "With all the negatives, witness seemed like the strongest point in the program."

I asked several former I-Ws in my own congregation why they had chosen this service. For Herbert Weaver, I-W was part of a family tradition. His father had been a conscientious objector in World War I and his oldest brother worked in a hospital in CPS. He himself was glad for a chance to provide a service which matched his conviction while he fulfilled an obligation laid on him by the government. Without a family peace tradition, Rodney Cavanaugh chose I-W after viewing war movies. He learned from them that war was not for him.

Two alternatives to regular I-W service were available. One was Voluntary Service, organized by the churches. In contrast to I-W, volunteers received only maintenance payment, not wages. The other was Pax, an overseas program which, having already begun, was authorized as alternative service.

According to Calvin W. Redekop in *The Pax Story* (Pandora Press U.S., 2001) some 1,800 men served in Pax

from 1951 to 1976. Of these, 110 were from Canada. The first Pax work was to build housing for refugees in West Germany. Right away Pax met up with the German construction standards. The building inspector who discovered that “most had no ‘specialized building experience’” was alarmed. “But the Pax director’s passionate appeal ‘to give the boys a chance’ avoided a potential crisis, and the ‘boys’ soon demonstrated that they could learn fast” (64).

Having begun as builders, the Pax men eventually moved into other programs and scattered throughout the world. This scattering is illustrated anecdotally in *Soldiers of Compassion* by Urie Bender (Herald Press, 1969). This book uses memoirs of Pax men as a basic source of material. The first nonbuilding unit performed agricultural work in Greece where “land had been left idle so long the hard soil barely yielded to the homemade wooden plow pulled by an emaciated mule leftover from the Marshall Plan” (54).

Appendixes in the Bender book list the dates and number of men who served in 39 countries to 1968; 22 different church bodies from which Pax men came; the names of Pax men in service from 1951 to 1968.

My brother, Truman Hertzler, was a builder at Enkenbach in West Germany from 1953 to 1955. In addition to building he taught Sunday school to 10-year-olds. He offered them Bibles if they would memorize selected Scriptures, and two of them complied: Ute Tyart and Rainer Schmidt.

In 2003 the Enkenbach Mennonite Church celebrated 50 years and Pax men were invited. “I was called to the front,” Truman reports, “and there were Ute Tyart (now Hiebert) and Rainer Schmidt, both grandparents, with the Bibles I had given them. My heart was full.”

In the meantime, the Mennonite churches encountered theological and sociological influences which affected our perspective on peace and peacemaking. A number of these are described in *Mennonite Peacemaking* by Leo Driedger and Donald B. Kraybill (Herald Press, 1994). They observe that “peace convictions are fragile. Stubbornly held by one generation, even to the point of death, they can quickly shatter with the winds of nationalism and social success in the next” (37).

They review the Mennonite experience in the last half of the twentieth century and conclude that “Although nonresistance was fading, its legacy was not lost. Mennonites remained committed to peaceful ways” (58).

Peacemaking began to take a more active form, particularly during the Civil Rights era and the Vietnam War. The authors point out, however, that the background theology was based on Guy F. Hershberger’s *War, Peace and Nonresistance* (Herald Press, 1944). Some saw Hershberger’s position as “sectarian” but these authors perceive that “Hershberger’s appeal to a single moral law . . . set the stage for later Mennonite scholars who would argue that one moral law ‘God’s righteousness’ applied not only to the

church, but to civil government as well” (79). The issue debated then, as now, is how much responsibility peaceful Christians should accept for the violent trials of the world.

Driedger and Kraybill call attention to John Howard Yoder’s *The Politics of Jesus* (Eerdmans, 1972) which was “directed toward an ecumenical audience, but it happily coincided with the needs of the hour in Mennonite circles” (148). Yoder insisted that Jesus was radically active. “In good Anabaptist fashion he argued that Jesus was not only relevant for social ethics, but also normative” (149).

In the end, Driedger and Kraybill identify the issue which troubles the church today: how firm a position to take on peace and peacemaking when inviting people to membership. “If peace convictions are central to the gospel they assuredly should be made explicit for baptism and membership. But legalistic expectations easily violate the very essence of the gospel itself” (273).

In *Two Kingdoms, Two Loyalties* (Johns Hopkins, 1998) Perry Bush covers the same period with some unique observations. Of special interest is his chapter 5, “The Decline and Renewal of the Mennonite Community.” He observes that “As the old separated community dissipated, Mennonites worked to construct another one based in a shared understanding and orientation toward society” (152).

Bush includes an account of how a group of draft resisters attended the 1969 session of Mennonite General Conference at Turner, Oregon, where “they received a much warmer welcome than they had expected. In suc-

cessive meetings with church hierarchy, while hearing the uneasiness and doubts from some delegates, the resisters discovered a number of MC leaders surprisingly receptive to their message” (248).

The United States draft ended in 1972, even as Pax ended in 1975. Then in 1984 Ronald J. Sider

addressed Mennonite World Conference in Strasburg, France. The address was published in *Gospel Herald* (Dec. 25, 1984) as “Are We Willing to Die for Peace?” Sider observed the extent of “idoltrous nationalism, religious bigotry, racial prejudice, and economic selfishness [which] turn people against people in terrifying orgies of violence. . . .

“Never has the world needed our message more. Never has it been more open. Now is a time to risk everything for our belief that Jesus is the way to peace” (898).

Sider’s vision catalyzed Christian Peacemaker Teams, an ecumenical organization with an international ministry. As reported in *Getting in the Way* (Herald Press, 2005), it “began in the fall of 1988, when Gene Stoltzfus, director of CPT from 1988 to 2004, became its first staff person” (12).

Driedger and Kraybill identify the issue which troubles the church today: how firm a position to take on peace and peacemaking when inviting people to membership.

The goal of CPT is described as “‘violence reduction.’ CPTers stand in the way of violence by such acts as accompanying civilians threatened with violence. Teams also use conversation, video, photography, and journalism to discourage individuals in tense settings from acting violently. In addition, CPTers provide a ‘ministry of presence by living in the thick of the conflict’” (13). Reports in the book tell of activities in six different areas: Iraq, Canada, Hebron, Haiti, Mexico, and Colombia.

So far only one CPTer has been killed. George Weber, a 73-year-old volunteer from Ontario, was killed in Iraq when a tire blew on January 6, 2003 and the vehicle in which he was riding rolled over (27-38).

However, others have been assaulted. *The Mennonite*, June 7, 2005, tells of Cliff Kindy who was shoved to the ground by a Jewish settler in Hebron. “Choosing to transcend the anger, Cliff gradually rose so as not to threaten his attacker. He extended his hand to the settler in sincere greeting, ‘Hello, my name is Cliff. I do not believe we have met.’ . . . The response came with a moment’s delay. ‘My name is Hate and I hate you.’ Although the hater was unable to let go of his hate, the exchange diffused the clash and the crowd gradually dispersed to their homes without further incident” (10).

The *Mennonite Weekly Review* for May 23, 2005 reports that the work of

CPT in Iraq has inspired some Iraqis to organize a peacemaking group called Iraqi Human Rights Watch. “Fifteen members of that fledgling Muslim Peacemaker Team held their first public action on May 6—a cleanup project bringing together Shia and Sunni Muslims in Falluja . . . a place of discord among Muslims.”

I note in closing one more development which I believe has its roots in CPS: the professional practice and teaching of conflict resolution.

As one of a number of examples, I mention John Paul Lederach. He is now on the faculty of Notre Dame University and is the founding director of the Conflict Transformation Program at Eastern Mennonite University. In his book *The Journey Toward Reconciliation* (Herald Press, 1999) he writes, “My personal story is that of a believer, a peacemaker, and a sociologist, a teacher and always a learner. . . . I want to explore the spiritual foundation that undergirds my work as a peace building professional and academic” (15).

In sixty years we have come this far. What the future holds and how our churches will respond remains to be seen.

—*Daniel Hertzler, Scottdale, Pennsylvania, a longtime editor and writer, contributes a monthly column to the Daily Courier (Connellsville, Pa.).*

The Meeting of Body, Spirit, and Soil

A kingdom parable

Thy kingdom come,

Thy will be done,

As in heaven, so on earth.

(Matthew 6:10, Modern Reader’s Bible)

Bright sunlight unfiltered by any cloud
spread its glory across a high, blue dome of spring sky
as we trekked in Rich’s well-traveled van

across the flat, greening spaces of Northern Indiana prairie.

Dressed and ready for work we were,

having answered Rich’s call a day before

to share in the labor of the season,

tending gardens and cleaning barns,

alongside our sisters at the Kindy farm.

While sun and sky showered spring solace upon our heads,

death and destruction rained from

desert-dust-darkened skies over Iraq,

defiling the soil with the blood of Abel’s offspring,

drenching the sand with the tears of Rachel’s lament.

Our brother had left the family farm mid-winter

journeying across dangerous frontiers and desert spaces

answering the call from a voice crying in the wilderness

to stand in solidarity with Iraqi brothers and sisters,

to be a flesh-and-blood sign of the way of peace,

to bear witness to the possibility

that God’s reign

is THE reality

on which we must reckon

for our salvation.

. . . Jesus came into Galilee
proclaiming the gospel of God:
“The time has arrived;
the kingdom of God is upon you.
Repent, and believe the gospel.”
(Mark 1:14-15, REB)



The same call had fallen also upon my ear,
 but after prayerful wrestling my heart discerned that I should remain,
 to see whether, after all the centuries, perhaps the prophet
 might prove more acceptable at home than he did in Nazareth.
 Now, as the next season of warring and planting was upon us,
 our brother lay convalescing in a hospital bed in Amman
 after suffering injuries in a motor accident—
 having been mercifully aided
 by the passing stranger who made himself neighbor
 along the bomb-wreckage-littered road to Jordan,
 and then graciously nursed
 by the grieving townsfolk and their doctor
 whose hospital lay devastated and children lay dead from bombing.
 While bombs burst upon Baghdad,
 rendering buildings and bodies into rubble,
 we rendered heart, soul, mind and strength—
 shoveling manure, laying mulch, clearing debris—
 to build up the soil's life-sustaining power.

And as we bent our backs to the toil,
 our meager labor was amply compensated
 with the daily bread of earthy eucharist—
 the nourishing substance of spiritual conversation,
 the sweet odor of soil freshly overturned from winter rest,
 tasty apple cake,
 soft warbling wafting on the gentle breeze through budding trees,
 cool, thirst-quenching water drawn up from the depths,
 more tasty apple cake,
 and the satisfying ache of a body tired from honest effort.

Do not keep striving
 for what you are to eat and what you are to drink,
 and do not keep worrying.
 For it is the nations of the world
 that strive after all these things,
 and your Father knows that you need them.
 Instead, strive for God's kingdom,
 and these things will be given to you as well.
 Do not be afraid, little flock,
 for it is your Father's good pleasure
 to give you the kingdom.
 (Luke 12:29-32, NRSV)

As I kneeled down to pluck up and cast aside
 plant stubble remaining from last year's harvest—
 left in place to hold the soil in its proper place,
 to conserve with care the divine gifting—
 the rain-softened ground hospitably received
 the pressing weight of my body-presence
 as if I were an expected guest
 invited to sojourn there awhile.
 My grateful hands greeted the fertile soil—
 cool, dark, rich, sensuous delight—
 the primal stuff of the mortal being
 formed into flesh by craft of the divine hand
 and warmed into life by breath of the eternal word.

What can we say the kingdom of God is like?
 What parable can we find for it?
 It is like a mustard seed
 which at the time of its sowing in the soil
 is the smallest of all the seeds on earth;
 yet once it is sown
 it grows into the biggest shrub of them all
 and puts out big branches
 so that the birds of the air
 can shelter in its shade.
 (Mark 4:30-32, JB)

Then, there, amidst the grace-full meeting of body, spirit and soil,
 parable seeds scattered in good ground,
 sprouting and growing we know not how,
 yielded grain ripe for harvest—
 peace with earth close to hand,
 peace with neighbors near and strangers far,
 peace with heaven and its Lord.

And looking up I saw
 the kingdom of God
 unveiled momentarily, elusively—
 like Yahweh passing by with a mountain murmur—
 here in this place where heaven and earth
 are joined with mortar of mundane toil and fellowship.

You cannot tell by observation
 when the kingdom of God comes.
 You cannot say,
 “Look, here it is!” or “There it is!”
 For suddenly
 the kingdom of God
 will be among you.
 (Luke 17:20b-21, REB)

—Darrin W. Snyder Belousek, Elkhart, Indiana, has taught at Goshen College and served in various overseas and service assignments, including most recently in the theology faculty at Lithuania Christian College. He currently teaches part-time in the philosophy Department at Bethel College (Mishawaka, Ind.) and studies part-time at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary.



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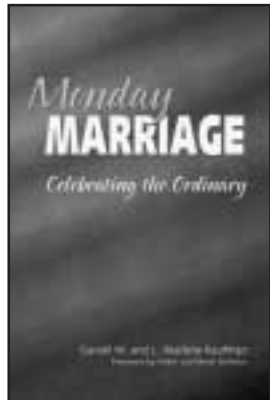
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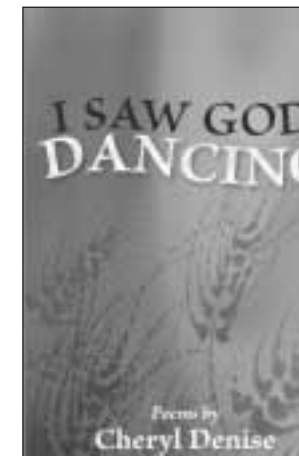
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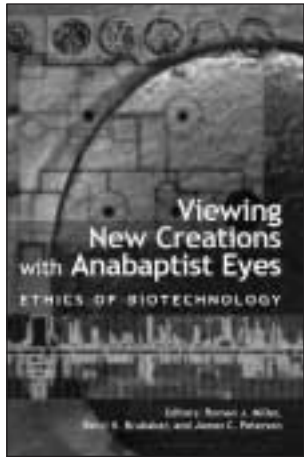
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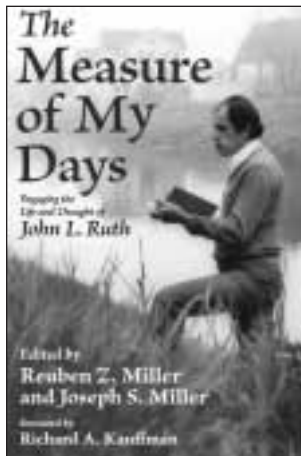
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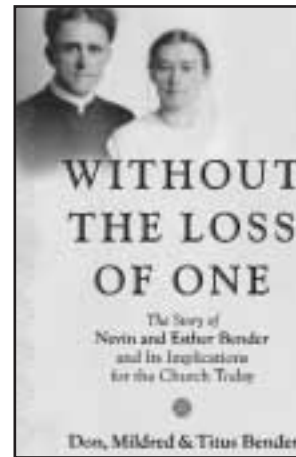
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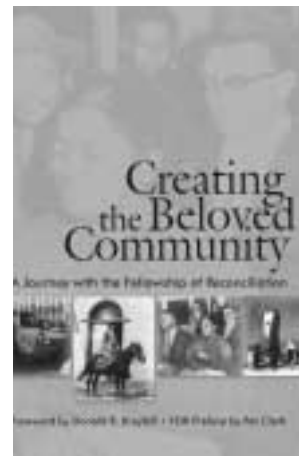
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Evening Chore

My grandfather has climbed into his truck,
a rusty blue ford with a few stray
bales of hay bouncing like children
in the back. He's riding out to the far
pasture where cows have been grazing
twenty-five years in the shade of some elms.
The dog that disappeared in a thunderstorm
and never came back is on the seat
beside him. He's making whiny noises
and thumping his tail like an amplified
heartbeat. Before the door falls shut
behind them, the old man is cupping his hands
to call the cows away from the shadows
and into the field where the last light is
already sinking.

—*Shari Wagner, Westfield, Indiana, has an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from Indiana University, and her poems have appeared in various literary magazines, including Southern Poetry Review, Indiana Review, Black Warrior Review and in the anthology, A Cappella: Mennonite Voices in Poetry (University of Iowa Press).*

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