

DreamSeeker Magazine

Voices from the Soul



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Ink Aria

Crossing Time and Life Zones

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Beneath the Skyline

Looking Sweaty and a Little Muddled (and Why)

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Who? Me? A Fundamentalist?

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Enlightenment

Elaine Greensmith Jordan

The Turquoise Pen

Out of the Blue

Noël R. King

and much more

Autumn 2006

Volume 6, Number 4; ISSN 1546-4172

Editorial: Portents of Doom, Warblers of Hope

As this autumn of 2006 the five-year anniversary of 9-11 is being remembered, it seemed appropriate to find ways to mark it in this autumn issue of *DreamSeeker Magazine*. This is why the lead article by Steve Kriss and the final ones by Daniel Hertzler and by me address 9-11 or issues connected with it. Kriss feels and thinks his way through New York City five years later. Hertzler casts a jaundiced eye on readings of the Bible that turn it into a book for seeing today's events as end-times portents. And I dare to wonder what my marriage teaches me about fighting terrorists.

Then as has been true in so many ways since 9-11, as some have declared us in a war on terror conceivably to be fought for decades, as war grinds down people and souls in Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel, Lebanon, Africa, and elsewhere, life still must somehow be lived. So other articles and poetry explore the nooks and crannies of ongoing life.

Some do so with a particularly light touch. 9-11 seems particularly and nicely far away to me when I read my sister Noël King's report on the aliens whose spaceship's tires go flat. Ditto when faced with Elaine Jordan's "stupid car" and the enlightenment she somehow manages to pull from the story surrounding it.

Nor do Renee Gehman or Deborah Good wander far from laughter. Gehman lets us smile with her at the

mismatch between who she feels herself to be and who she is expected to be while serving in Vietnam. And Good manages simultaneously to convey the enlightenment that comes from walking and to tell of things like tooth caps that get swallowed and don't "pass."

Then Mark Wenger and Katie Funk Wiebe help us explore the meaning of church. Although neither intends explicitly to connect church with 9-11, questions of how we relate to church and faith and God have only become more urgent as 9-11 and terrorism so regularly force us to confront what we ultimately believe and what values we will love out in this troubled world.

Wenger helps us celebrate anew that it's worth going to church. And by drawing lessons from her sometimes fundamentalist background Wiebe helps explore another issue related to 9-11: how we commit ourselves to sacred values as well as to the churches that support them even as we remain ever-growing seekers.

Meanwhile poets Dale Bicksler and Darren Belousek take us back out into a world of pain and poverty, of questions about who or how God is—yet also of heaven to be brought down to earth through egrets and hummingbirds. Portents of doom surround us these five years after 9-11. And warblers of hope.

—Michael A. King

Portents of doom surround us these five years after 9-11. And warblers of hope.

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Submissions

Occasional unsolicited submissions accepted, 750-1500 words, returned only with SASE. Letters invited

Subscriptions

Standard rates in U.S.
\$14.95/yr. in US, automatic Jan. renewals, cancel any time.
Single copy: \$3.75

Free online:

www.CascadiaPublishingHouse.com/dsm

DreamSeeker Magazine is published quarterly in spring, summer, fall, winter.

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ISSN: 1546-4172 (paper)

ISSN: 1548-1719 (online)

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Michael A. King

Response: My Life-Changing Accident

I was moved by Michael A. King's column, "Seeing the Entire Trip" (Spring 2006). The story of his daughter's car accident reminded me of an accident I had in 1996 which completely destroyed my father's car.

Little did I know how that experience would completely change my life. As it happened, my parents were out of town, so I had to begin to deal with the situation myself. I called my parents' destination and left a message for them to call home once they had arrived. I later shared my news. This was difficult. They were relieved that I was safe, yet all I could think about was the end of that car (fortunately insured).

At the time of my accident, I had just completed advanced university science courses as preparation to attend medical school in French in Quebec, Canada. I had had my interviews and my plan was essentially set. Yet after my life flashed in front of me, I felt as though I was meant to venture out into the world for another purpose. I thought a year of working abroad might better prepare me mentally.

Initially, I acted as a liaison in France for a Canadian university

while I completed a qualifying year for a Master's in French. My plan had been to return to Canada. One thing led to another and I was invited to complete my Master's and Ph.D. based in France. I found short-term work to enable me to do this. During six years based abroad, I took initiatives to build resourcefulness and other skills which I wouldn't have if I had taken another path.

In hindsight, I think Higher Forces were giving me a wake-up call through that accident. We can easily lull ourselves into a state of complacency in which we think we wish to do something but aren't really listening to our inner voices.

Today I'm living and working in Australia after having had the good fortune to expand my spiritual life through travel to 42 countries. If I hadn't had my accident 10 years ago, I would likely be leading a very different life. I am grateful to that Higher Power for opening my eyes to new ways I can enrich my life as well as the lives of others through writing and other pursuits.

—Dr. Liara Covert,
Victoria, Australia

In hindsight, I think Higher Forces were giving me a wake-up call through that accident.



Letters to DreamSeeker Magazine are encouraged. We also welcome and when possible publish extended responses such as this one (max. 400 words).



Photo by Dorothea Lange

Caption: *Destitute peapickers in California; a 32-year-old mother of seven children. February 1936.*

Reproduction number: LC-USF34-9058-C (film negative); Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection J339168

Apropos Psalm 137

A meditation on Dorothea Lange's Migrant Mother

At the muddied threshold of our exposed lean-to,
huddled with other hovels in the forsaken camp—
there we sat down. We might have wept,
having beheld the pea crop lying ruined,
struck down at tender age by bitter frost
like a plague upon Egypt—might have wept,
were not springs of sadness already iced over,
had not the last salty stream coursing down worry-grooved channels
long since dried up, as soon may, too, life-milk from spent breast.
And then she arrived, exiting the car with a camera,
and asked whether she might photograph us.
How shall we pose for this stranger,
we who do not belong to this land?

What strained furrowing of anxious brow,
what turned-down line of drawn lips,
what oblique posture of calloused hand
resting pensively against hollowed cheek,
could say?—that we are lost,
that we yearn to be at home, for what had been our home
 (remember, children?—
 picking daisies and tomatoes from the garden,
 afternoon picnics under the sheltering oak,
 the porch swing creaking as it cradled our weight);
what distant gaze from deep-set eyes
toward a life nearly sunk beneath the horizon,
could say?—that another dawn awakens only a barren dream,
that hope lies fallow on frozen fields.

—*Darrin W. Snyder Belousek teaches philosophy part-time at Bethel College (Ind.) and studies part-time at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary. He lives in Elkhart, Indiana, with his wife Paula and attends Prairie Street Mennonite Church.*

Seeing Fear and Beauty in Empty Skies

Steve Kriss

Five years later: On the road toward who we might become under a bright but empty sky.

I still remember the smell, not the acrid smell that everyone talks about in New York City but of clear, still September in western Pennsylvania—the smell of advanced summer in the Allegheny Mountains. It’s the smell of my favorite time of the year; with locusts buzzing, flowers in full last bloom, hot days, and cool nights.

I was on the way to a breakfast meeting, driving my Honda CRV in Somerset County on the morning of September 11 when I heard a plane had crashed into the World Trade Center.

As a former New Yorker, I called a NYC cop friend immediately to find out what was happening. With no real news, I went into a breakfast meeting that was interrupted by incomprehensible reports. I returned late that night to my brick rowhome in Mt. Washington, a Pittsburgh neighborhood overlooking the city’s newly vulnerable skyline. A neighbor two houses away had hung a sheet out that said, “Nuke the towel-

headed bastards.” I began to wonder what sort of crazy people I lived among on Sycamore Street.

The next morning waking up in a bright room, my first thoughts were that maybe all that had happened the day before was somehow not real. However, my first assignment in this new day was to help teach a class of young and confused students at Duquesne University with my Indian co-teacher, who seemed rather nervous about leading this group of mostly white students. He would later tell me that soon after 9-11 someone had called him Osama.

We knew the world had changed, we said. In all logic, we might know that 9-11 wasn't an isolated event or day. The Twin Towers had been bombed before; they just hadn't collapsed that time. While 9-11 wasn't really so discontinuous with everything around us globally, our awareness of what was going on around us suddenly had an epicenter in lower Manhattan.

I spoke with a Kansan friend soon after 9-11. I said that the folks waving flags and ready to wage war in the nation's heartland needed to simmer down, that those of us on the East Coast were still afraid and stunned, too close to the action to feel patriotic, too close to the real death and fear to demand more of it. We got over that reticence fairly quickly.

At church we sang “Lord, make us instruments of your peace” Sunday after Sunday. It was the right song to sing in Somerset County in those days. We weren't sure what it meant sometimes or what it called for—or

from us. We collected money to send to Mennonite Disaster Service's New York initiative. We remembered a son of the congregation who had been dispatched to Afghanistan. We prayed.

My memory fades, though, and what I did or didn't know related to the 9-11 events has become unclear. My day-to-day existence hasn't changed that much. There are intrusions on my life, and every once in a while we are reminded—whether from Bali, Madrid, London, or Mumbai—but mostly I have taken to heart President Bush's advice to go on with my life as usual.

So I have moved on with my life, though I know New York isn't the same without the towers. And it's strange that Shanksville has become a tourist destination. (The last time I was there, there was a travel coach from Conestoga Tours.) My NYC cop friend Carl reminded me that New York is always vulnerable, always will be. He says that what he's learned from 9-11 is that if it's your time to go, it's your time to go. Taking cues from his stoic, slightly Calvinistic words, I have gone on.

Sometimes I gaze at the list of those who died at the World Trade Center. I remember that many, like me at the time, hadn't turned 30 yet. Five years later, I wonder what I have done with the years I have been granted past their own, to emerge into my early 30s and find my way in this post-9-11 world.

My friend Christine, a United Methodist pastor in New Jersey, sug-

gests that things have changed. She believes 9-11 has made us more fearful, more insular, pulled us with a vengeance into the comfort of our homes. She thinks 9-11 is intensifying today's immigration debates. I think she's right, but it must be something deep inside of us that's different, because on a day-to-day basis I don't notice it that much. I still go to Starbucks, drive my Honda CRV, call my parents every chance I can, root for the Steelers, listen to nonsensical Top 40 music, and sing sometimes equally meaningless music at church.

However, it seems clear that our national willingness to go to war has increased. We don't want war on our own shores again. We'd rather battle far away, on turf that isn't lower Manhattan or an old mine in the Alleghenies. I won't forget hearing while eating a late breakfast at Eat-N-Park on 9-11 that a state of war existed in the United States. I won't forget being in the familiar hills of western Pennsylvania not knowing where to go; if planes could fall out of the sky in Shanksville, nowhere was safe.

My seminary professor, Dorothy Austin, suggests that what terrifies us is that 9-11 happened among us and could again. We were and are terrified of having nowhere to run from the whole emerging new reality. With the story permeating the media, there wasn't anywhere to flee from it for months back then, and it's still hard to find solace today.

With 9-11 pervading our corporate minds, our fear and confusion had the potential to move us toward compassion (and did to a degree). But we have also turned toward taking eyes for eyes, teeth for teeth.

Whatever our belief regarding whether war is wrong or not, it matters that our willingness to go to war has changed. Our willingness to make others live in the same fear that we have tasted and to experience the loss that we have known is a strange and unusual desire. Rather than conquering hate with love, we have attempted with-

out much success so far to conquer hate with might and consumption.

At the end of the trial of Zacarias Moussaoui, the only person convicted in the United States in relationship to the 9-11 attacks, he said something haunting amid his diatribes. He suggested that we (U.S. Americans) had an opportunity to learn why people like Mohammed Atta (considered the 9-11 mastermind who piloted one of the hijacked jets) hated us. He suggested that we had a moment of opportunity to learn, and we turned away from it.

Such a proclamation from someone seemingly at least half-mad or consumed by hate is hard to take as truth. Nevertheless, I suspect that in our willingness to rush to war we have missed an opportunity to learn.

As I have been contemplating this article for months, I have been obsessed

Our willingness to make others live in the same fear that we have tasted and to experience the loss that we have known is a strange and unusual desire.

with the question of whether 9-11 changed anything or nothing. In that question is a hope that we have learned something, I suppose. I have seen both the “World Trade Center” and “Flight 93” movies in preparation for writing. I returned to NYC twice to gauge what is happening and who the city and I have become. I went to Shanksville to look, to take pictures, to assess. And to wonder.

While watching “World Trade Center” I cried as the men were rescued from beneath the pile. But I had also cried while watching Michael Pena’s portrayal in his previous movie, “Crash,” as well. I felt like I could vomit the whole way through the “Flight 93” movie, wondering if in the film somehow the actors would pull off efforts nonviolently to save the plane.

I am writing now in Soho, noticing on my walk over here the brightness of Lower Manhattan. I listened to Bruce Springsteen’s “The Rising” on the way to NYC to get my head back into the emotion of it all. The words to his song, “I woke up this morning to an empty sky,” lingered as I looked up.

The sky is still empty, and at the same time, however painful it might be, it is brighter in lower Manhattan. A few friends who recently visited NYC remarked how friendly the city is—and kind to them as visitors with small children. Could it be that New Yorkers are more aware of their shared vulnerability underneath a big empty sky? What would that experience have been if they weren’t white Canadians but Pakistani or Saudi?

Earlier this year, I took a group of international visitors to Ground Zero, to walk around the fence. Most of them (20-somethings serving with Mennonite Central Committee’s International Visitor Exchange Program) didn’t know the full story, couldn’t figure out what happened and why.

While we were at the overlook, we saw a group of conservatively dressed folks whom we all immediately recognized as Mennonites. A young woman from Indonesia asked if we could talk with them and I thought how interesting it would be to connect here—this disparate array of young Mennonites (French, Tanzanian, Indonesian and Thai) with this group of traditionally dressed Mennonites.

We initiated a conversation and made our global connections, talking to the Sensenig family at Ground Zero. We made connections that spanned the globe—New Jersey to Pennsylvania to Indonesia—in our quick conversation. Smiling, we walked away from the pit, on the sidewalks of New York with a realization of worldwide interlinkages at this site of tragedy and horror.

So I have been searching all over for what has changed, but maybe I can boil it down to this: in many ways nothing has changed, yet nevertheless everything has changed.

We realize our vulnerability more as U.S. Americans—a realization we don’t bear alone but one that runs also through Toronto, London, Mumbai, Madrid, Mumbasa, and Bali to

Beirut, Baghdad, and Chechnya. In an increasingly interconnected world, fear amid vulnerability is not unsurprising or illegitimate. The same forces that bring us together can pull us apart, drive us toward hate or suspicion in ways we rarely imagined before 9-11.

Yet amid it all, there seems such great possibility. We’re experiencing a sort of pregnancy that invites us toward action, toward embracing the moment in all its fullness, with all of our fears, holding on to hope that is simultaneously practical and overwhelming.

The triumph in “Flight 93” and in the retelling of the “World Trade Center” is that people become someone they never thought that they might be. The disparate passengers become a community with a cause and a hope somewhere in the skies over Pennsylvania. At the World Trade Center, city workers become stunningly heroic in their commitment to the tasks of rescue and help.

When I look at the names and listings of those who died at the World Trade Center, at Cantor Fitzgerald or Windows on the World, I have twinges of survivor’s guilt, considering my own post-9-11 life and the privilege to continue to have it. I feel charged to live my life as fully as I can bear, whatever that might mean. That, I suspect, is the sweetest and most meaningful response any of us who live in the face of fear can offer.

Since 9-11, I have become someone else. I have finished coursework,

taken a new job, moved to a new Pennsylvania city, switched my pastoral credentials to a new conference, gained and lost and gained weight, gotten new glasses, and grown some facial hair. I have traveled out of the country more than in the previous portions of my life combined. I’ve learned a bit of Italian, Arabic, and Indonesian.

Yet I am not all that different on this bright late summer day. Much like five years ago, I am fascinated and energized by New York, deeply connected to my family and an array of friends who span the globe, in pursuit of a

vocation that contributes meaningfully to others and offers opportunities to see the world.

And yet, I wonder what made me suspicious of a woman with a *hijab* (traditional Muslim headcovering) who was at the “World Trade Center” film? Why have post 9-11 realities challenged my belief in pacifism? Why do I find myself believing that the United States has entered an age of empire?

I wonder where my church, my people, my nation of citizenship may be going. And sometimes I am pretty nervous. I can’t forget the sign that went up on Sycamore Street in Pittsburgh. I know the craziness of it all has changed not only the neighbors but me as well.

Still within the changes there is hope, in those moments like the conversation with the Sensenigs at the World

Still within the changes there is hope, in those moments like the conversation with the Sensenigs. . . .

Trade site. While we were amid something that could call out fears and push us to disengage, there remained the possibility of acting, trusting, and living with hope. We were embedded in a desire to reach out in this age of global connectivity even in the shadows of the scions of global economics, terror, and hate. We approached the Sensenigs expecting to find connection rooted in love.

Inshallah, we might find a way to notice more than the empty sky but to peer into our hearts, to look out into human faces—whether they wear a lacy prayer covering or a silky hijab—and find not only ourselves but our situatedness within the global community.

These beautiful days of autumn are here again. Amid the memories of what once happened on this kind of amazing day comes the revived possibility of attacks with jetliners. We can

be drawn into an all-consuming fear (and CNN-watching) that attempts to deny the wonder and possibilities of having been created by God to live in a time such as this.

But the clearness of the early autumn can also remind us of our humanity. We gather within the shadows of pain, surrounded by reasons for nervousness and fear. Still we find the building blocks of hope and gaze into the beauty of a bright sky.

—*Steve Kriss, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, is a doctoral candidate at Duquesne University who works with Franconia Mennonite Conference. He's still infatuated with New York City, in love with the Allegheny Mountains, and trying to learn Bahasa Indonesian on Rosetta Stone software while practicing speaking with Indonesian immigrants in Philadelphia.*



Crossing Time and Life Zones

Renee Gehman

“**T**he most important single factor that decides the severity of jet lag is the number of time zones crossed.” Amid flying through every single time zone, this was not what I wanted to hear. But at that point it was either read my travel safety brochure or continue in conversation with the British diving instructor who reeked of alcohol. (Maybe I should have told him that alcoholic beverages become two to three times more potent when on a plane.)

Of course the latter option grew increasingly more appealing as I read on, learning that nighttime flying, flying east, and being one who normally likes routine and hates change are also factors contributing to jet lag. Given that these were the exact circumstances of my situation, things were looking bleak.

I knew in my head that a year of service with Mennonite Central Committee in Vietnam would involve crossing the globe, but I never really caught that the plan would be executed. I had even less a grasp of the fact that I would actually at some point be here. If that makes any sense. It's hard for me to tell anymore, considering my life this past week and the unusually large amount of “not making sense” occupying my head.

On the surface, this plan is oozing with logic: I'm here through MCC, and, since I am a Mennonite, we make a compatible team in relation to goals, viewpoints, and so forth. I've come as part of the SALT program (Serving and Learning Together), and indeed I am very interested in serving in and learning from another culture. I'm spending the year working at the The Gioi [World, pronounced *tay zoi*] Publishing House in Hanoi as a manuscript editor in the English department—and in fact my primary career aspiration is to be an editor!

But beyond that, things are about as hazy as the air in this land of humidity, monsoons, and quite a bit of pollution. First of all, I am about as far away from home as I can get without having to arrange something with NASA. In Asia.

Ask anyone who knows me fairly well, and he or she will affirm that there is no place in the world I'd rather pass my days than at home in Pennsylvania, where we eat shoo-fly pie, sing Mennonite hymns, and lament over the worsening ratio of cornfields to housing developments. So for me to end up almost exactly across the world for a year seems a non sequitur.

Second, there is the little matter of my personality. I did warn MCC, noting in my application essays and interview that basically my personality appears to be the exact opposite personality of what they are looking for. SALT calls for people who are

people people, who are flexible, who can learn to rely on others, who are good relationship builders. I am an introvert who needs alone time, works by a schedule, prefers to be in control of my life, and craves knowing at all times exactly what is going on.

Even after getting here, I found myself looking over a new orientation packet and reading (in all caps!): EMPHASIZE RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEOPLE RATHER THAN JOB OUTPUT. This statement caused me to wonder why I shouldn't immediately email someone in charge—in all caps, perhaps even in bold—DO YOU REALIZE I HAD NO SOCIAL LIFE IN COLLEGE BE-

CAUSE I WAS OBSESSED WITH MY ACADEMIC OUTPUT? DO YOU HAVE A PEPPER PROGRAM BETTER SUITED TO ME?

(Un)fortunately, I had also told MCC that I am a person willing and eager to learn, and to change my ways—at least when my predispositions interfere with relating to, understanding, and growing with other people. Then there are the *L* and *T* in SALT: “learning together.” MCC knows I'm not entirely qualified or prepared for this position yet is willing for us to learn together.

I'm less worried about living up to my own expectations than I am about meeting everyone else's. The expectations of those who clasped my hands in theirs and asserted that I was a brave soul. Of those who supported me fi-

nancially, because they believed that they were putting it toward a good cause. Of those who have welcomed me into their lives in Vietnam, who have already offered me so much love and care without even knowing me.

I'm afraid of letting those people down, of not being good enough. What if I can't find ways to communicate and establish strong relationships with people? What if I don't learn anything or make a difference to anyone? I'm not expecting to do something huge, but I do want all the support and encouragement I've received already to be worth it.

Because lately I find myself staring glaze-eyed at this vast world of opportunity, scared to death that I'll never know how to do anything with it. And in these moments, it's difficult to see the logic and reason.

And yet—reason aside—somewhere past all the worries and the fears, in a place much deeper, nearer, and dearer to my core, I am convinced

beyond a shadow of a doubt that this is where I'm supposed to be now. Even when I find it difficult to remember why exactly, I still just know.

I think back on all those factors contributing to my jet lag, and it certainly would have made sense for recovery from the flight to have been a minor disaster. But it wasn't so bad after all. I'm sleeping through the nights. I feel fine. And I'm trying to apply the experience of flying across continents and oceans to my expectations for what the upcoming year will be—new, scary, and at times daunting—but also holding potential to leave me feeling surprisingly refreshed. Say tuned, say I, not only to readers but also myself.

—Renee Gehman, Hanoi, Vietnam, is assistant editor, DreamSeeker Magazine, and an editor at the The Gioi Publishing House as part of a Mennonite Central Committee service assignment.



Looking Sweaty and a Little Muddled (and Why)

Deborah Good

When most people think of the urban, single woman, they probably think *fashionable* and *polished*. Funky heels, a few hair products, and a purse chosen carefully to match her outfit. She's flagging down a cab after an evening with friends and martinis in a climate-controlled restaurant with unctuous temper-controlled waiters. She is Carrie Bradshaw on any given episode of "Sex and the City."

Somehow I have lived 20 out of my 26 years in large East Coast cities and managed always and still to fall short of fashionable and polished.

I'm more likely the young woman you see sprinting down the sidewalk for a train, a heavy shoulder bag flopping against my back and a plastic bag ripping at its handles because of the soccer cleats and shin guards inside. Sometimes I'm the one stepping into the library wiping moisture from my forehead where a subtle bike-helmet imprint lingers, my hair slightly matted from the commute.

I have spent a lot of my summer looking sweaty and little muddled. This is not because I am an utter

disaster when it comes to yuppiehood, though that is probably true. It is because of how I live my life: waiting on public transportation, navigating the city on my bicycle, and for blocks and sometimes miles at a time, getting by on foot.

On a recent trek from one part of Philadelphia to another, I caught the R8 train to the blue line, also called the "El." It was on the El that a man once sat next to me and launched immediately into conversation.

"So I went to the University of Pennsylvania to have caps put on my teeth."

I smiled (How could you not?) and turned to look at him.

"But later that day," he continued, "they fell off, and I swallowed them."

"Oh, really?" I managed to spit out.

"So I went to my doctor, who said they would pass. But they didn't pass and they didn't pass." I think by this point, my smile was taking up quite a bit of my face. "And so I had an endoscopy done. They eventually had to cut them out of me."

"Wow—"

"And the crazy part about it is that my insurance covered the endoscopy and surgery—but they won't cover my dental, which is why I went to the school in the first place instead of paying for a regular dentist."

See. This is why I opt for public transportation over the comfort of my own air-conditioned car.

"And so I had an endoscopy done. They eventually had to cut them out of me."

Once it leaves downtown, the El emerges from its underground tunnel and becomes an elevated train. I rode to a stop in North Philadelphia and then walked maybe a mile to an urban farm, carrying a shoulder bag and a small cooler which I would soon fill with my house's biweekly share of local food (see www.greensgrow.org).

Sweat dripped down my legs as I walked through one of the summer's worst heat waves.

For a recent issue of the *Philadelphia City Paper*, Duane Swierczynski had his staff exploring the city on their own two feet and then writing about it. He himself walked a street he had seen rushing by his window probably hundreds of times before. "In exchange for an hour of my time—that's how long it took to walk home—everything in an overly familiar stretch of the city looked like I'd just been sprung from jail after ten years," he writes. "Up close, everything was new" (Jul. 27-Aug. 2, 2006).

This is, of course, the romanticized view.

But he is right. Walking brings me the world a little slower, less insulated, and in greater detail. On foot, I have plenty of time to internalize the smells, sounds, and conversations I encounter on my way.

After filling my cooler with carrots, tomatoes, blackberries, eggs, and cream, I set off on a slightly different walk through the neighborhood, back to the El. It was a quiet walk past

rowhouses, small businesses, a few abandoned lots.

I would like to say that my stroll was pleasant, and that I was bolstered by my choice to reduce my CO₂ emissions into our ever-warming atmosphere (Al Gore, are you reading this?) and curtail my gas consumption, in its tangle with global politics and war (How about you, Michael Moore?). But it was not pleasant, and I was not bolstered. I was hot, my cooler was heavy, and I could not wait to get home.

Most places in the world are full of complexities from which trained social scientists and political analysts are continually mining explanations. I too am trying to make sense of it all. Why the bloodbath in the Middle East, or the ever-rising real estate values in my neighborhood?

I read the paper (not often enough) and listen to my fair share of National Public Radio. I read books by people smarter than I. Mostly, though, I prefer to leave the academics to their good research and their banter, while I leave my house to walk, ride, or bus the streets they analyze.

When I return, I won't be able to tell you the percentage increase in homelessness since the year 2000, but I will tell you that the woman who asked me for money had short, graying hair and a steady gaze. I can't write a thorough report on the gentrifica-

tion of the neighborhood where I grew up, but I can tell you that it still smells like urine on Irving Street, half a block from the construction site where six-figure condos are going up.

I like to tread the landscapes of places I cannot explain and do not understand. Philly's local news programs teach us to fear parts of the city. But when possible, I prefer to breathe in the air of these streets—mostly in the daylight, mind you—and come home telling my own stories.

There is a man who seems to take this idea very seriously. His name is Rory Stewart, a Scottish author who took a long, cold walk across war-torn northern Afghanistan in 2002—then wrote a book about it, *The Places in Between*.

I have not read the book (so can't recommend it), but in the *Washington Post* article I did read, Teresa Wiltz writes about Stewart's perspective on colonialism. While early colonialism was obviously a horrific and exploitative system, Stewart notes that many colonialists did spend years living in and walking through the lands they stole, even trying to understand the people who lived there.

In contrast, "today's 'neocolonialists,' foreign-aid workers and diplomats, parachute into a country, trying to impose Western culture on a people they don't understand. It is, he argues, a 'morally dubious' proposition" (Wiltz, "Equal Parts Blisters and Enlightenment," Aug. 9, 2006).

I wonder if walking a little more, we might engage our streets, neighbors, and foreign lands with a little more personality and openness to the idea that we might not, in fact, have the whole picture.

Too often, we watch our world go by through glass windows and on television. I wonder if walking a little more, we might engage our streets, neighbors, and foreign lands with a little more personality and openness to the idea that we might not, in fact, have the whole picture.

I have a basket on the back of my bicycle which an old boyfriend called "the kitchen sink." Lugging my produce through North Philadelphia reminded me of an endeavor I undertook just one day earlier, when you would have found me biking home with green hostas in my kitchen sink, sticking up behind my head like silly rabbit ears.

And picture this: My housemate once biked to her community garden plot with one tomato cage wrapped around her body and a second balanced precariously behind her seat.

Here's to all of us who have looked slightly ridiculous loading all variety of paraphernalia onto the backs of our bikes, or walking for blocks, sweating like the dickens. I write this column in our defense.

Look out, Carrie Bradshaw. We just might be the next authentic image of the urban, single woman. And I bet we can walk farther than you can in your heels.

—*Deborah Good, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, is a writer, editor, and middle school classroom assistant. She spends a lot of time walking, biking, and waiting for buses and trains—and firmly believes that changes in our transportation habits, and in the way we design our cities and suburbs are part of the answer. She is also occasionally found driving a car, and can always be reached at deborahagood@gmail.com.*





—Illustration based on the work of designer Gwen Stamm, Scottsdale, Pennsylvania.

Algonquin

This place that owes its existence to the beaver
Is best when seen alone
With time to dawdle into the evening
Till the Merlin comes to preen on the gray dead tree.

Back into the park again before dawn
While the northern sky silhouettes pointed evergreens
And mist covers warm lakes
Like hair over a dark woman's eyes,

Over the Mizzy Lake Trail too fast this time
To even think of seeing the prior evening's marten,
Too single-minded to identify thrushes on the path
Or appreciate the loon's melancholy yodel,

Full of morning's hope and last-chance determination,
I hurry over roots and rocks toward West Rose Lake.
Perhaps if I arrive first and early enough,
I'll meet my quarry before we leave the park for good.

Across the lake, in mist that has yet to clear,
A bull moose watches me, no longer eating,
Then sloshes to land, breaks through the brush,
And disappears into the forest.

Elated by the success of my persistence,
Yet disappointed by my dream-like encounter,
I return to things just as beautiful—
Boreal chickadees, warblers, and hummingbirds.

—Dale Bicksler, Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, works in the IT department of a Harrisburg insurance company and enjoys birding in his spare time.

Why I Still Go To Church

Mark R. Wenger

The latest *Newsweek* arrived in the mail today. As usual, the first thing I read, aside from the always breathless cover, was the “My Turn” column. This week a second-year cadet at West Point writes about “My March into the Military Academy.” The week before, in “Celebrating the Pity of Brotherly Love,” someone from Iowa wrote tongue-in-cheek about how his older brothers tortured him as a child. The writers of “My Turn” are an eclectic bunch, rarely folks with names I recognize. The topics are unpredictable and distinctly personal.

In something of the same vein, I’d like to share some of the reasons I still go to church—an activity, from what I read, that fewer of my neighbors engage in today compared to 20 years ago. For me, it is almost automatic. Sunday morning rolls around; my wife, daughter, and I get in the car for the drive to church. Why do I do it when I could spend more time reading the Sunday newspaper, sleeping in, mowing the grass, or taking off on a bike ride?

The easy answer would be that it’s a habit ingrained from infancy. After all, I grew up in a missionary family. Back in the States, our family gave so many

church programs that we finally rebelled; Dad offered to pay us for the programs he’d already booked. There’s no denying it, going to church is a habit.

Still, there were a number of years in college during which I reveled in the luxury of unscheduled Sunday mornings beholden to no one but my own whims. At a certain point, however, I somehow sensed a need to start attending again. Perhaps it was guilt, but I don’t think so. Something else drew me back, something subtle and essential, something I was missing.

I was majoring in Bible and church history at the time, but I was quite sure that I didn’t want to be a pastor. Pastors were a different breed. Maybe I could teach theology or Bible. You don’t have to be quite as “holy” or immersed in the faith if you teach, or so I thought.

Teaching jobs were hard to find, and I got a phone call inviting me to become an assistant pastor. That was 22 years ago. Since then I’ve spent most of my life as a pastor in two congregations. These days, however, Sunday is no longer a “game day” I need to gear up for. I am not a pastor anymore. Let me tell you, it’s much more relaxing. I can arrive at the last minute. There’s nothing I have to prepare. I’ve become an average church member, a participant rather than a leader, a consumer more than a producer. Still I go to church. Every Sunday. Why?

To be sure, there are professional reasons. I’m now in the business of training pastors. How long would I last in my job if word got out that I didn’t go to church? Nevertheless, I don’t go to church as a concession to my employment situation. I go because I want to. Here are some of my reasons.

These Are People I Trust

I sometimes wonder whether I am an oddball, but people I’ve known at church have caused me few deeply painful and no personally devastating experiences. Yes, I’ve been lied to, cursed out, and had my confidence betrayed. I’ve seen church hypocrisy and listened to facile explanations of silly and wrongful behavior. But those are the exceptions. Besides, I don’t know of a better track record anywhere else in human affairs.

Among church folk, I have found people who generally seek to do the right things and for whom integrity of character has value. These are people who are often generous with money and time, easy with laughter, involved in their communities, committed to their spouses and children, and sometimes courageous and sacrificial. Ron Sider has written *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience* (Baker Books, 2005), in which he scolds many in the church for living no better than society in general when it comes to racism, generosity, sexual promiscuity, divorce, and abuse. Sider pronounces a solid prophetic word. But it

I don’t go to church as a concession to my employment situation. I go because I want to. Here are some of my reasons.

doesn't match very well what I know of the congregations I've been part of.

Church Is Where Families Are Formed and Protected

Growing up, developing identity, finding a spouse, staying married and raising children, getting old is a gauntlet none of us comes equipped to navigate safely on our own. I needed help. We all need help.

But many of the settings and activities that built personal face-to-face community in the past are harder to find. We change jobs and addresses all the time. Our housing often fosters anonymity or isolation. I doubt either online communities like Facebook or members of the helping professions will ever replace the rich authenticity available only by literally rubbing shoulders with the same people over the years.

Think about it. Where else but church do all the generations from newborn infants to tottering grandparents regularly see each other, talk to each other, and do something together? There are John and Hazel being honored at the birth of their first child. There's Mary, an elderly single woman who talks with the youth and supports their service projects. When death occurs, young children learn about what's important in life.

Church Is Where I Sing and Make Music with Others

Let me put it straight: One key reason I keep going to church is because of the music. Yes, church people

fight a lot about music. I've been in my share of vigorous discussions. Still, when music is competently led and performed for the good of the whole group, regardless of the style, something beautiful, even miraculous occurs. I am often lifted and moved when I can add my voice to others in melody, word, rhythm, harmony, and instruments. These elements combined in the right way transform a group of individuals into a vibrant body.

Church Is Where I Can Often Experience God Among People

The splendor of creation is a kind of Scripture to me. Personal meditation and prayer are often pleasant work. These and other similar activities can be rich with the presence of God. But like a log pulled out of the fireplace, experiencing God all by myself soon loses the flame. I am strengthened and challenged in my faith by others with whom I worship. I am strangely lifted beyond my fears, obsessions, and opinions.

Some people believe in God; it's just other people they can't stand. Like the bumper sticker Fred Craddock saw on the pick-up truck in front of him. "I love my wife and I love Jesus. The rest of you can go to h—." Being the church with other people is messy and sometimes requires lots of faith and endurance.

Still, going to church fills out the colors of God's rainbow for me. I experience divine mystery, truth, and love in hues I'd otherwise be blind to.

So there are a few reasons why I still go to church. Might something happen to turn me off and turn me away? It's hard to imagine, but yes I suppose it's possible. Lots of folks have quit.

Still I keep going to church. I keep

going because there would be a hole in my life and soul if I walked away.

—Mark R. Wenger, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, is Director of Pastoral Studies for Eastern Mennonite Seminary at Lancaster.

The Meadows

Mute swans make just the sound I need
In the early morning of our last day.
Tree swallows, light on the wind,
Drop like flakes in a freak November storm.

If I note the calm of the pond,
The color and texture of the marsh plants,
And the elegance of the lone egret,
Can I can take some of this heaven to earth?

Author's Note: "The Meadows" is the local name for the Cape May, New Jersey, Migratory Bird Refuge.

—Dale Bicksler

Who? Me? A Fundamentalist?

Katie Funk Wiebe

For many years voices debated within me, each attempting to establish a bulkhead for a specific worldview. On the one side was fundamentalism with strong evangelical strains; on the other, a worldview that said the gospel is about freedom and not the law. Sometimes fundamentalism spoke loudest.

Former president Jimmy Carter in *Our Endangered Values* (Simon and Schuster, 2005) lists the prevailing characteristics of fundamentalism as rigidity in beliefs, domination by authoritarian males, exclusionary tendencies of people not considered true believers, and isolationism. To this could be added fear of intellectualism and humanism and a strong endorsement of dispensationalism with an emphasis on premillennialism. And always the stress on the individual.

It's sort of like getting chicken pox. You know you've been infected, but you still hope that the spot on your neck is a mosquito bite, not something worse.

Today I admit that some fundamentalist traits were part of the Mennonite Brethren church to which my parents belonged and often attended. I grew up with fences. I see it now, but not then. Then the

church I knew was a strongly missions-minded church with more converts overseas than in America.

There were fences between MBs and General Conference Mennonites and between MBs and other Mennonite-related denominations, and even higher fences between MBs and anyone who belonged to mainstream Christianity. At the time, these fences seemed normal and right.

At the age of nearly 90, my father, a lay preacher, repeated his favorite sermon at my request shortly before his death. His text was John 3:8. The message was that the Holy Spirit is not stuck in one pattern. It blows freely. I think he meant not stuck in one denomination. He was often perplexed by the way people drove halfway across town to attend a church when there were a half-dozen closer by. He had figured it out that denominations were human inventions, not God's.

These fences are a legacy I have found hard to escape. Once this mind-set becomes part of your psyche as a child, it is hard to identify and discard. It seems so natural because it is part of you. My siblings and my children have all moved on to other congregations, as have the children of many MB friends. Why am I still with a group in which the voice of fundamentalism keeps speaking?

A little personal background may help. Our MB church when I was a child was 20 miles away across the Saskatchewan River, which froze over

in winter. With the roads closed, we stayed in our little "pagan" village of Blaine Lake from fall until the spring thaw. The United Church Sunday school, an amalgam of various denominations, became our church home as we children learned that Jesus wanted us to be "G-Double-O-D GOOD," which later I learned was rank heresy to a fundamentalist. Being good had nothing to do with salvation. You had to ask Jesus to come into your heart. You had to have words to talk about being saved.

In winter we did wonderful un-MB things like skating in the ice rink, enjoying Santa Claus at the Sunday school Christmas concert, getting our hair cut and curled, playing long intense games of Monopoly late into the night, wearing shorts and slacks, and attending school movies. But no drinking, dancing, or smoking.

Then came summer and attendance at the across-the-river church. Only in summer did we have to worry about being saved and listening to hellfire sermons. Only in summer did we sing "Are You Washed in the Blood?" and "Send the Light." Only in summer did we have to be concerned that the trumpet of the Lord might sound and snatch some people away, leaving behind clothes, even dirty underwear, wristwatches, and pocketbooks.

Yet those few months each summer were long enough to convince me I was a rank sinner. I needed to be con-

Why am I still with a group in which the voice of fundamentalism keeps speaking?

verted. As a child during Vacation Bible School I had made a gentle request for Jesus to come into my heart—but was that enough? Was I saved or wasn't I saved if little changed after going forward at an altar call?

If I was saved, why didn't my temptations leave me? Why did people keep going forward at revival meetings? Wasn't once enough? Something didn't jibe. In winter I could leave these questions behind and coast again.

Such ambivalence acted as a strong undertow when I began to question other more serious issues. As a young person I got caught in some theological emphases, especially fundamentalism's strong need to clearly separate right from wrong (and to see the greatest sins were sexual); biblical literalism with its need for proof texts, and stress on laws with little room for grace. I chuckle now as I remember how in Bible college my young adult daily devotions had to be at least 15 minutes long even if my roommate or I fell asleep on our knees before the other one finished praying.

I don't want to return to the judgmentalism of people's behavior I experienced in my youth when I became a church member. And the consistently imposed burden and accompanying guilt to nail neighbors, coworkers, and even casual acquaintances with the question, "Are you saved?" We were instructed to do that in Bible college on the streets of Winnipeg for personal evangelism classes.

It took me too long to realize that the Christian life cannot be reduced

to words, even words of Scripture thrust at people like a sword, to earn God's love. Or that an overemphasis on evangelism without an equal emphasis on discipleship can lead to trip after trip to the altar and spiritual stagnation.

Some leaders in the fundamentalist church nationwide got caught up with Darbyism and a study of the end-times. They delighted in figuring out the complicated puzzle of God's plan for humanity to the day and hour. As a young adult, I found myself entranced by a Sunday school study of prophecy. I liked puzzles. I bought a *Scofield Reference Bible* and studied the underpinnings of dispensationalism in the footnotes. I learned to draw all the complicated charts about the end-times. I ordered a *Prophecy* magazine. I could explain every line and arrow in those charts as easily as I could recite the alphabet.

Not until my adult life could I challenge the teaching that the essence of the Christian life is to figure out a mammoth cosmic puzzle according to these teachings, although the thrill is probably as great as nearly finishing a double-size *New York Times* crossword puzzle.

It took me too long to understand that scouring the daily news for clues to beat God at figuring out the divine plan for the end-times means you have to put all your energy into preconceived human conclusions and not into what is important about the Christian life. It took too long to say to myself, *I do not—I cannot—believe this. There is some truth somewhere in eschatology, but not when the*

result is an intricate drawing of lines and arrows.

I finally grasped I had the power to let go of certain interpretations. I didn't need to believe every humanly devised structure imposed on the Scriptures. I don't need to accept the *Left Behind* books—or *The Da Vinci Code*, for that matter—despite the grain of truth they may contain.

Trying to escape early influences is like trying to get rid of your DNA. With time I could acknowledge that denominational fences are permeable and that all denominations have gifts to offer the kingdom of God. I should have learned that as a child with our mixture of churches: Mennonite Brethren in summer, Russian Baptist church in our home in winter for my parents while we children attended the United Church Sunday school. Our school friends were Catholic, Doukhorbor, and Anglican with an easy camaraderie.

My adult life has been a second growing up—sorting, learning to come up with an understanding of God that is mine, not forced on me by old experiences. It has been a matter of choice.

Members of other denominations often place me with the Mennonite Church in its USA and Canada versions (Mennonite denominations not identical to my MB home denomination) because of the opportunities for

services I have found there. It and other denominations have given me a bigger view of the work of the church. They have stretched my understanding that God works in many ways, not just the MB way. Instead of my faith being diluted by mingling with other Christians, I am enriched. I am privileged to see the wider world, its diversity, and the common values all Christians hold dear. My faith is strengthened as I learn to know God's people outside my childhood fences.

A friend recently asked why I stay in the MB church when it restricts women's use of their gifts of service. I answered that as a member I can continue to speak to the church. For the remaining years of my life, I would like to be a member of a congregation where women's roles are no longer an issue. That may not happen. Despite some denominational moves in that direction, I see no overwhelming trends to offset the deeply entrenched belief that adult men with authority must have the true word and the final word. I have not heard a woman preach more than once in my home church in the last decade. Mostly men with wives hold key positions in church life. But that is only part of my answer.

Only in America with a church building on every other street corner can one drift from church to church and denomination to denomination when one becomes dissatisfied. Spirit-

My adult life has been a second growing up—sorting, learning to respond differently to old stimuli—to come up with an understanding of God that is mine. . . .

tual growth occurs when people of unlike thinking continue to work at their disagreements. The real testing of God's love through us comes when we stick with those we would rather not be stuck with. That's another reason I stay.

So I ask myself again, as an octogenarian: Why am I still in a church with leanings toward fundamentalism amid the mixture of evangelicalism and Anabaptism? I stay because among this body of believers are loving people with rich gifts of service.

I stay because I recognize the traces of a spirituality learned by enduring intense suffering. My parents, their families, and their friends knew violence, hunger, and pain. They trusted God because God was God, no other reason. Even today, when I feel downcast, I turn to the same simple hymns of faith I heard them sing when I was a child. These songs still speak to my soul, bringing God's presence into my heart as no modern praise/worship song can. God is with me as God was with them.

In *Growing Up Religious* (Beacon Press, 1999) Robert Wuthnow writes that it is special to grow up with a religious tradition that believes there is value in prayer and in learning to serve others. My father believed in helping the people in town without enough food. His heart ached to see them in such a condition. He had seen

too much hunger in Russia to reject them. Mother believed in steadfast prayer to the end of her life at nearly 99. I stay because of this spiritual inheritance, even though it is waning in the present generation.

I stay because churches with an evangelical heritage have a freedom to speak about spiritual matters, sometimes too glibly, I'll admit, which I miss in congregations in which only the minister, not the members, are freed to use God language. I am still an MB because I value biblicism. MBs have always nurtured Bible study and a personal relationship with God in Christ Jesus.

But I sit on the fence, sometimes closer to the outside than the inside, for other reasons.

As evidenced from my pew, the fortress mentality of fundamentalism church is still with us. We love it when people leave denominations to join us, but we find it hard to freely fellowship with anyone who doesn't use identifiable evangelical language. Yet this almost subconscious shibboleth handicaps our freedom to move freely among other Christians.

Evangelicals/fundamentalists are more likely to get taken up by the big church growth programs of national leaders like Rick Warren. The teaching of James Dobson reaches near equality with the Bible truth. One Sunday when I was handed a little gadget and a bottle of bubble-blowing liquid to show my joy in the Lord,

The real testing of God's love through us comes when we stick with those we would rather not be stuck with. That's another reason I stay.

I balked. Yet maybe becoming more childlike would help rid me of some of my inhibitions. So I blew a few weak bubbles. But I felt a deep loss at the absence of mystery of God, of transcendence.

F. Thomas Trotter writes about the "flattening of wonder" in the church through banality that leads away from a spirit of awe, wonder, and transcendence in the presence of God. Fundamentalists want things clear, simple, and understandable. Casual relevancy replaces a communal search "for authentic ways to confront and be confronted by the enormous complexity and terror of life in this world," Trotter writes (*Loving God with One's Mind*, Board of Higher Education and Ministry of the United Methodist Church, 1987).

The necessity to get doctrine precise and worship easygoing to achieve growth and relevancy leaves little room for wonder. Discrepancies and problems in the Scriptures must be explained, leaving no room for ambiguity. Everything has to be so house-

broken that the challenge of costly grace gets lost.

Church has become a normal, comfortable place to come to, not a place where you are warned that the fully committed life in Christ is risky and dangerous. Festivals of the faith become fewer and fewer as they are replaced by national social emphases like Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, Graduation Day, Memorial Day, and a multitude of others.

For some people, when the fundamentalism of their childhood doesn't make sense, their world falls apart. Some leave the faith. Some join another church. So far I haven't. At this stage in my life I have a clearer understanding of the messages I received in childhood. I have been able to move beyond some but to keep those that are nonnegotiable. I am still a seeker.

—Katie Funk Wiebe, *Wichita, Kansas*, is a writer, storyteller, and speaker. Among her more recent books is *Border Crossing: A Spiritual Journey* (rev. ed. *DreamSeeker Books*, 2003).



Enlightenment

Elaine Greensmith Jordan

We hear a good deal about spirituality these days, about spiritual growth and spiritual insights. Books on how to live a fulfilled spiritual life sell by the thousands, books like *Your Best Life Now* or *The Purpose-Driven Life*. I don't read those books, but I'm a lot like their readers: I want spiritual insights so that I might grow to be a finer soul. My need for enlightenment is so obsessive that I began, a few years ago, to dream of going to seminary to study religion.

"I hate your stupid car," my 13-year-old daughter said one lovely fall morning, interrupting my secret thoughts about God. She stood in my bedroom doorway looking formidable in her nightshirt and mammoth high-top sneakers.

"What are you talking about?" I asked, surprised by her loud voice so early in the day. "My car has nothing to do with it. You're going to school. It'll be okay."

I finished making my bed, knowing Margaret wasn't finished.

"That car sucks. I wish I lived with Daddy," she said and stomped off to her room.

We weren't talking about cars. My daughter had voiced our misgivings about starting the school year—her starting middle school and my beginning a new semester of teaching English at San Diego High.

I sat on the side of my bed to put on my teaching shoes. The black leather flats seemed like the heavy boots of a mountain climber. From her bedroom came sounds of Margaret getting dressed and banging around as if kicking every piece of furniture.

A moment later I saw a 40-year-old single mother in my mirror and wondered if she could face another year of high school students and the irritating man in the supply room. The mirror-lady knew I wanted to leave teaching and study the great religious teachers. Thoughts of leaving my daughter crept into consciousness too. If I were free of her, I could advance toward my spiritual goals.

Daisy, my spaniel, gazed up at me, her sad face reflecting my disquiet. "Cheer up, old girl. I have to go to school. Take care of Margaret." Sounds of fury still vibrated through the walls.

I pulled off the ramp onto the freeway, and my rusty old Chrysler stalled. "O God," I told Steve, the student who rode with me to school. "I'm so sorry."

"Doesn't matter," he said. Steve had the tanned face and easy-going nature of a genial Huck Finn. "Good excuse to be late."

"I take this as a sign from God."

"Been mentioning God a lot," he said, stretching and peering out at the passing cars.

I persuaded myself in the next

"Are you kidding?" Margaret bellowed when I told her my decision. She stomped around the kitchen in her enormous high-tops.

weeks I'd had signs from God—in the dog's face, in the breakdown of my car, and in the discomfort of my shoes. I must leave teaching and go to Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley. I'd take my difficult daughter and our dog and slip out of my teaching shoes

and into the sneakers of a graduate student. Margaret would grow out of her defiance in the quiet of a seminary in a college town.

"Are you kidding?" Margaret bellowed when I told her my decision. She stomped around the kitchen in her enormous high-tops.

"We'll have an adventure in Berkeley. You'll like it!" I said, my voice coming from some absurd place where resides the Great Mother who makes me talk like that. "Maybe some day you can follow your dream too—and go to beauty college." I knew Margaret could never manage beauty college.

"You going to be a priest?" she asked.

"No, no. You know women can't be priests."

"I hate that stupid car!" she shouted, hoping to frighten me.

I stayed frightened for the next two years in Berkeley while suffering with my daughter's absences, her hatred of school, and episodes of stealing. I'd walk the dark streets late at night, Daisy on a leash, searching for Margaret and feeling sorry for myself. I was never left alone to study the divine mystics and master theologians.

You can guess the ending of this search for enlightenment. Margaret finished beauty school a competent skeptical adult. Meanwhile after my years at seminary and then in ministry, I'm not sure I'm enlightened yet. I know I'm not qualified to make judgments about spiritual qualities in others. The state of my soul is dif-

ficult to figure—and I still drive a stupid car.

—*Elaine Jordan is a retired minister living in Arizona. More about her adventures with her daughter will be published in The Chrysalis Reader and The South Loop Review in the fall of 2006.*

A Sign in New Jersey

A roadside message in New Jersey, signed by God,
Said "I don't question your existence."
As if God, hurt to the core, feeling invisible,
Prefers shamed assent to honest doubt.

One can imagine a similar sign at Kathie's Christmas
Or a wet and slimy one floating on Loch Ness.
Do they, along with countless aliens in UFOs,
Feel slighted when evidence fails to convince?

God, for me, is exactly all that's good.
No omni guarantees (potence, science, or presence),
But no problem of evil either.
If good exists, so does (s)he.

—*Dale Bicksler*

Out of the Blue

Noël R. King

Well, I saw a spaceship once, in a movie when I was young. So I knew what it was when I pulled up in front of my house and there it sat, in the driveway.

My husband wasn't home, or I would have left it all to him. He is much better with strangers than I am, and I really was plenty tired, a long day at work.

I was going to at least wait until after I had changed clothes and had had something to eat and drink before dealing with it, but as I walked past it—stepping one foot into the grass just to get by—its hatch opened on the side. A little space being stepped out.

I could hear it talking in my head—I guess it was using that thought stuff, telephony or whatever they call it—and it basically asked very politely if it could park its spaceship there for a while. Apparently it had a flat tire or something that needed to be fixed.

I was a little exasperated, to be honest. Why did it have to choose *my* driveway, *my* house, to land in?

But I realized the thing probably couldn't take off again with a flat tire, and, truthfully, it made my house look more modern and balanced, architecturally speaking, than it really was.

I said, "Of course. Let me know if you need any help," and the space alien dipped its head and scurried back up the hatch.

Later, when my husband came home, he said, "What is *that* in our driveway?" It was dark then, so of course he couldn't really see what it was.

"It's a spaceship," I said. "They're fixing a flat."

"Oh."

Then. . . "Well, how long do they plan to be there?"

"Don't know. Didn't say."

The next morning I looked out the window and the spaceship was

gone. So were all the tires on our cars.

"Fancy that," said my husband.

"Yeah," I said. "Wow."

You know, I really kinda wish I had asked that thing the meaning of life.

—*As circumstances warrant, through her Turquoise Pen column Noël R. King, South Riding, Virginia, reports on strange and wonderful things, including spaceships with flat tires.*

No Hands

The ride is smoother
When life is experienced
Without holding on.

—*Dale Bickler*

Not Reading the Future from the Bible

Reviews of On the Road to Armageddon: How Evangelicals Became Israel's Best Friend and of In God's Time: The Bible and the Future

Daniel Hertzler

On the Road to Armageddon: How Evangelicals Became Israel's Best Friend by Timothy P. Weber. Baker Academic, 2004.

In God's Time: The Bible and the Future by Craig C. Hill. Eerdmans, 2002.

These books are complementary and may well be read in tandem. The first recounts the history of dispensationalism from Darby to the *Left Behind* novels. The second offers an alternative to the dispensationalist scheme of biblical interpretation.

Although a premillennial view of last things has been present in the church for centuries, the dispensational version was developed in the nineteenth century by John Nelson Darby, a leader among the Plymouth Brethren, a break-off group from the

Church of England. Darby devised a theory which proposed that God has been dealing with his people through various “dispensations.”

As popularized in North America by C. I. Scofield, a dispensation was a period of time during which God tested humanity by a specific revelation of the divine will. In each era humankind failed to fulfill this responsibility. This in turn led to the beginning of a new dispensation in which God tried again. “In short, dispensationalism was an intricate system that tried to explain the stages in God’s redemption plan for the universe” (20).

The failure of mankind to respond adequately to the love and mercy of God is not hard to document. Less convincing are the intricate and detailed interpretation of world events and the predictions about what should be expected to happen. Darby perceived that the Jews are the people who most interest God and that the church would be only an interlude before the end-times action should begin.

An important element in the Darby scheme is “the secret, any-moment, pretribulational rapture of the church” (23). In this theory, faithful Christians would be taken away while the less faithful, the unbelievers, and Jews would be left behind. This is the scheme on which the *Left Behind* novels are based.

Dispensationalists have held a pessimistic view of history: Things should be expected to get worse, and since God—not they—is in charge, there is nothing they can do about it.

The dispensationalist

approach to the Bible proved to be enormously flexible over time: while never deviating from their basic expectations, dispensationalists were able to make adjustments when they had to to keep their interpretation of history moving in the right direction. (43)

Dispensationalists have held a pessimistic view of history: Things should be expected to get worse, and since God—not they—is in charge, there is nothing they can do about it. Thus each new development in the ways of evil is reassuring—it is a sign of the approaching end. Efforts to save the environment or to mediate conflicts are not on the dispensationalist agenda.

Since the Jews figure prominently in their theory, dispensationalists need to have a position on the Jews. They have engaged in Jewish evangelism, although not always with results. “In the long run, it seems, results were not always the primary concern. The dispensationalist mission to the Jews had symbolic value too” (128).

Two modern developments have been of interest to them, one positive, the other negative. The positive one has been the emergence of the modern state of Israel in 1948, identified by Weber as “the mother lode of

prophetic fulfillment” (156). The details never quite fit dispensationalist expectations. But “without a restored Israel, there could be no antichrist, no great tribulation, no Armageddon, and no triumphant second coming of Jesus” (155).

So dispensationalists have supported Israel all the way. Chapters 6, 8, and 9 of Weber’s work describe happenings in Israel and how dispensationalists are involved. Chapter 7 discusses the *Left Behind* novels and several dispensationalist changes of tactics.

The negative development has been the demise of the Soviet Union. Since the Soviets were to be key players in the threat to Israel bringing on the Armageddon, they had to change the subject. “They were flexible, able to adjust when necessary, regroup and move ahead” (203). Weber shows that the development of the American Christian right has been fostered by dispensationalists.

They are not friendly toward efforts to promote peace in the Middle East. According to their view, “Peace is nowhere prophesied for the Middle East until Jesus comes and brings it himself.” Anyone who presses the Israelis to give up land to promote peace “is ignoring or defying God’s plan for the end of the age” (267).

Can one be a “Bible-believing Christian” without being a fundamentalist? Craig C. Hill states his position near the end of his book: “As a modern, scientifically oriented person who also prays, I can well understand what it is like to stand with a foot on each side,

shifting my weight between them” (189). He wishes to discuss eschatological issues, and these inevitably involve biblical interpretation, so his subject covers both of these subjects throughout.

Hill regularly shares his own experience, which adds a dose of reality to the book. For example, he confesses that he was a “teenage fundamentalist” (13). Of course it is well-known that some fundamentalists have rejected biblical religion altogether, so Hill’s pilgrimage is of some interest.

He takes his stand on the resurrection of Jesus and proposes that with that as a foundation, problems in eschatology can be sorted out. Included is the recognition that early Christians had a “limited view of the cosmos, a limited view of human (much less of geological) history” (8) and “that most of us no longer hold literally to the biblical account of creation (six days and all that)” (9).

He calls for inductive rather than deductive Bible study and recalls a time when he noticed differences between accounts of the same story in Matthew and Luke. When he asked one of his “elders” what he did with such a problem, the elder answered, “I just try not to think about it” (14). Hill was determined to do better than that.

His solution to prophetic and apocalyptic conundrums is familiar to many who have thought about these issues. Biblical prophecy, Hill observes, “as a whole is more concerned with influencing the present than with revealing the future” (33). Also, he notes that not all the

“prophetic expectations” were fulfilled. “The prophetic vision appears to have been more impressionistic than cartographic, more a sketch and less a photograph than is usually imagined” (42).

In a brief appendix, he comments on the *Left Behind* novels and concludes that this “most popular Christian eschatology is unscriptural. . . . At the end of all their theorizing and systematizing, it is the Bible itself, this wonderfully diverse and complex witness to God and Christ, that is left behind” (207).

Hill’s approach to apocalyptic material is to survey history and apocalyptic literature and then focus particularly on Daniel and Revelation. In contrast to “popular writers” who see these books as “principally books of historical *foresight*” he would go with those who look into them for “theological *insight*” (95). For this it is necessary to interpret them “within the context of the apocalyptic tradition which so clearly influenced them” (96).

He does not see a need for Christians today to expect the literal fulfillment of the images in the book of Revelation. Rather, “If anything is certain about Jesus, it is his conviction that God would someday be victorious over the powers of evil and death” (169).

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In his final chapter, Hill addresses “the tension between religious and scientific views of reality” (177). This tension, he asserts, has always been present. As an example he notes the difference between “future” and “realized” eschatology. In a graphic on page 180, he portrays the perspective of the gospel of Mark which, he suggests, emphasizes a future-oriented eschatology and the gospel of John, which tends toward a realized eschatology. As for Paul, Hill finds him between the two. “Within the space occupied by Christianity, there is tension between God’s transcendence on the left side and God’s immanence on the right” (187).

If Hill’s formula seems a little too neat, we can agree that the book provides a useful survey of apocalyptic perspectives, along with the author’s articulated position as a person who respects science but also prays. It can serve as a resource for one who is seeking to be a “Bible-believing Christian” without getting tangled up in the hermeneutical absurdities of premillennial dispensationalism and the fictional fantasies of the *Left Behind* novelists.

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



Honoring Instead of Inflaming You, the Terrorist or My Spouse

Michael A. King

Every now and then I have a fight with my wife. Joan is a wonderful spouse; this column is in the end not about her. But it is about what our fights may teach, if I dare make such a huge leap, about fighting terrorists.

What particularly catches my attention, as I ponder our fights, is how quickly I find myself severed from rationality and possessed by the need for her to grasp how right I am and how wrong she is. If she dares fight back—as she often does, dear woman, this being one reason I celebrate being married to her when back to sanity—my flame flares white hot. Here I am, training her in truth, justice, and Michael’s way, and she dares—she dares, oh, the travesty!—to challenge me.

I order the generals within to provide reinforcements. Stat! Bring me my cruise missiles of maddened rhetoric hardened with hate. Fly in my bunker-busting bombs to destroy her generals as they huddle in her plotting against me.

Because after our decades of marriage she can fly across the blazing desert of my war-mode mind with her own Predator drones, she spies the shock and awe I intend for her. She orders in Apache helicopters backed by F-16 fighter jets.

And we draw near the brink. We glimpse now, through the smoke of battle, that destination called Divorce. If we press on, this country which is our marriage will be reduced to rubble, and no matter who dealt the other the final blow or who may still be left standing to declare victory, we will both have lost.

There is only one footpath around that outcome, but who will take it? The human spirit so flinches from that path, especially in the heat of battle. The path takes the walker into the very heart of the war, there where blood pools on the streets, the sniper bullets crack, the tanks rumble, and the fighter pilots aim.

And the walker of that path must throw down her (I say “her” because she often manages to walk there before I do) weapons. She must cry out to his generals and foot soldiers, and up to the snipers and the pilots, that she does, actually, glimpse part of why they’re so enraged at her. “I’m sorry,” she must say. “I’m sorry for my part of this war, and for the ways in my own anger I set out to hurt you.”

The horror of that path is that it takes her to peace, the promised land

across the war zone, only if he softens. But he may not. He may use her foolish vulnerability to finish the job and mow her down. She risks her very life if she tries to end the war. Yet if she doesn’t, the war will only escalate, and both will lose no matter who wins. So she takes the risk. Or once in a while, when he can match her courage, he does.

And so far the one who first sets out on that path has in the end been joined by the other. So far the one’s readiness at last to stop escalating the war has in the end gentled the enraged heart of the other, until they reach that oasis called Peace. There at last they are able to engage in constructive discussion of what caused the war and what resolution of grievances will enable them to stay in peace rather than resume battle again tomorrow.

I know marriage partners are not nations. I know generalizing from two to millions can get us only so far. But I wonder why we mostly seem to learn nothing about how to relate to other nations from our most intimate relationships.

Every time I hear national leaders explaining why We are so right and They are so wrong, I imagine how I would feel if that were my wife speaking. Every time I hear it’s okay to bomb them first so they don’t bomb us first, I think of what happens if Joan dares to say something like that to me.

Because after our decades of marriage she can fly across the blazing desert of my war-mode mind with her own Predator drones, she spies the shock and awe I intend for her.

Every time I hear someone explain that we’re in a global war, we in the rational and civilized West against the irrational and barbaric Islamic fascists, I think of how in the heat of marital war each side always believes his side or hers is the right side, the rational side, the civilized side.

Then I wonder why we act as if people in religious or global conflicts are so different from people in marriage. In marriage, if you threaten people, if you demean people, if you explain why you’re so perfect and they’re so awful, you blow things up. The more you violate the other, the more the other wishes to violate you. The more you try through brute power to vanquish the other, the more the other schemes to build the weapons to vanquish you.

Yes, I know married people aren’t nations or jihadist groups. But what if the dynamics aren’t that different? What if every human being, whether in the West or the East, Christian or Islamic, needs some sense that she honors him, that he honors her?

Scott Atran believes such a perspective is not so far-fetched after all. Atran, a professor at John Jay School of Criminal Justice and elsewhere, has been drawing attention in such varied newspapers as the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times* with his studies of terrorism (available in such sources as “Sacred Values,” 2006 web exclusive, *The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* online at www.thebulletin.org; and “The Moral Logic and Growth of Suicide Terrorism,” *Washington Quarterly*, Spring 2006).

Key to Atran’s perspective is his conviction that many of the world’s conflicts are rooted in competing “sacred values”—passionately held beliefs people are willing to die or kill for. Attack a people’s sacred values, and they will never back down until you kill them or they you.

Among incitements to terrorism, says Atran, is experiencing one’s sacred values as violated and needing to fight back at all costs. Then when the West declares its sacred values are violated and justifies its own fighting back at all costs, the stage is set for endless global conflict.

Atran notes, for example, what a powerful sense of violation humiliation inflicts, such as at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, and traces how it “leads to moral outrage and seemingly irrational vengeance (‘get the offender, even if it kills us’)” (*Washington Quarterly*, 138).

He observes that

Especially in Arab societies, where the culture of honor applies even to the humblest family as it once applied to the noblest families of the southern United States, witnessing the abuse of elders in front of their children, whether verbal insults at roadblocks or strip-downs during house searches, indelibly stains the memory and increases popular support for martyrdom actions. (139)

He also explains what a sense of offense among jihadists is generated by such a document as the *National Security Strategy of the United States*

(published by the White House as its proposal for military and foreign policy in 2002), “which enshrines liberal democracy as the ‘single sustainable model . . . right and true for every person, in every society—and the duty of protecting these values against their enemies’” (139-140). (See also Wendell Berry’s critique of the *Strategy* in “A Citizen’s Response to the National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” *DreamSeeker Magazine*, Spring 2003.)

Atran does not aim to justify or simplistically appease terrorism (nor do I)—and in fact even worries that too many governments are too tolerant of terrorism. But he calls for an end to overreliance primarily on strategies that inflame rather than vanquish terrorism.

And that takes us back to marriage lessons. Someone has to walk at least part of that frightening path toward honoring the other. Someone has to begin to send signals that “Yes, I see you hold sacred values too. They may not be mine, but now I begin to glimpse reasons why you cling to them as tightly as I cling to mine.” Someone has to try treating the other as human being and not only as worm to squash underfoot.

Let me be clear: This is not the same as appeasement. If you seek as my spouse to appease me in the midst of marital battle, then in an effort to placate me you ignore or minimize

the actual damage I am doing to you. Your peacemaking words are not sincere but intended to mollify me so that I may be less inclined to hurt you.

To honor me is to rise above your own rage long enough to grasp what in my position is a kernel of truth I understandably hold dear.

Needed are gestures not of appeasement but of honoring. To honor me is to rise above your own rage long enough to grasp what in my position is a kernel of truth I understandably hold dear. To honor me is not simply to give up what you hold dear or no longer to care whether I run roughshod over it. It is to find enough generosity of heart to begin to honor my kernel of truth even if I have not yet shown signs of honoring yours.

Certainly this honoring path is risky, whether for spouses or nations. The other side may use any vulnerability to smash rather than honor us. But surely the path the United States is on, which threatens to lead us into a scorched-earth war of unyielding sacred value against unbudging sacred value, is no less risky.

Yes, terrorists deserve their great share of the blame for using their sacred values as justification for slaughtering innocents. Yes, there is much to celebrate in the United States and the larger West and to expect our opponents to honor. But surely the most powerful country not only in today’s world but in the history of the planet also deserves blame when it in turn, refusing to honor any sacred values but its own, uses that power to humiliate, to demean, and counterproductively to inflame.

Atran himself, who has had extensive direct contacts with members of terrorist groups, sees breaking inflammatory cycles by honoring the other as more than pie-in-the-sky dreaming. As Sharon Begley reports in the August 25, 2006, *Wall Street Journal* article “The Key to Peace in Mideast May Be ‘Sacred Beliefs,’” Atran believes that, for example, the perennial antagonism between Israel and Palestine could begin to ease if each side found ways to honor what the other holds dear.

Atran has told U.S. policymakers

that the Palestinians will never give up their “right of return” to land they fled when the state of Israel was founded. Unless, that is, Israel gives up one of its own sacred values, such as its “sacred right” to all of Jerusalem.

Israel, in turn, would never apologize or give up

Jerusalem unless the Palestinians let go of their sacred belief that Israel should not exist. (A9)

So I pray that someday we will hear Palestinian leaders truly releasing Israel to exist and Israeli leaders acknowledging and making amends for ways they have dispossessed Palestinians. I pray that someday United States leaders will not only compete to see who can most loudly promise to battle all terrorist vermin to the death. I pray that someday they will also risk dropping hints of understanding that sometimes only by honoring you can I step back from the brink of divorce or Armageddon.

—*Michael A. King, Telford, Pennsylvania, is pastor, Spring Mount (Pa.) Mennonite Church; and owner, Cascadia Publishing House. Mostly no thanks to him, he and his wife Joan have managed to step back from the brink for nearly 30 years.*



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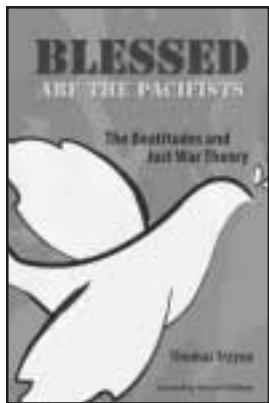
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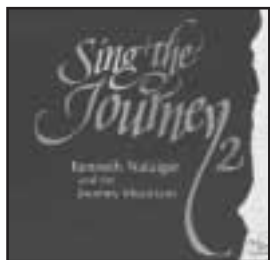
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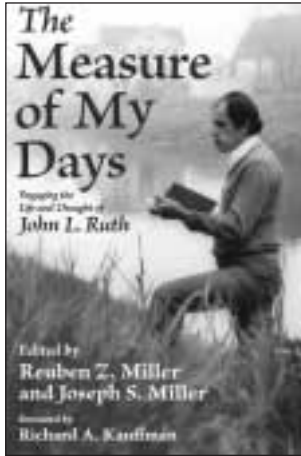


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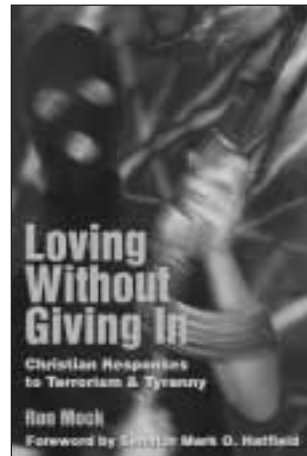
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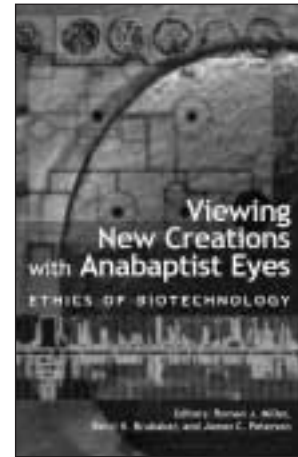


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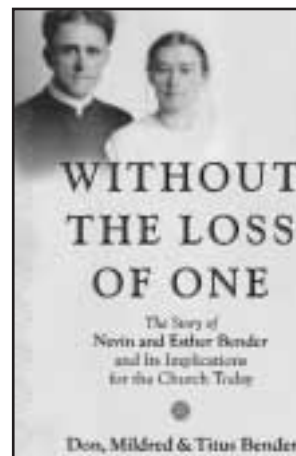
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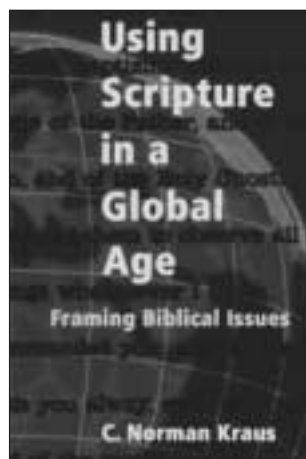
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Harold Stone

Turning down Railroad Ave, an alley in spite of its name,
I see the spinning red, white, and blue and know
there's no need to look for another barber this time.
There will be no sign on the door: "Harold is in the hospital"
or "Harold will return from rehab as soon as possible."

When I enter the simple, old-fashioned, three-chair shop,
the maker of those hand-written signs is the first to greet me.
"I'm glad you're here," she says. "He needs something to do,"
referring to her husband of 71 years reclining in the barber chair.
Harold greets me too and offers me his chair.

Harold's been cutting hair continuously since July 5, 1928.
Even his few years in the Navy were spent cutting hair,
first on a troop transport ship that delivered five thousand at a time
and brought some home, then on a hospital ship called USS *Repose*,
one of several with names like *Haven*, *Comfort*, and *Tranquility*.

Though still within one block of where he started at age 14,
in Mechanicsburg where he now holds the key,
and even though their income can hardly have been large,
he and his wife traveled around the world, a fact
amply illustrated by their world map made pin cushion.

Every time Harold must close his shop for health reasons,
he loses a few more customers, but he'll not lose me,
not just because he cuts my hair for five dollars,
but because I don't want to miss this part of his life,
and I want to give him what he still wants—something to do.

—*Dale Bickler*