

DreamSeeker Magazine

Voices from the Soul



Is That All?

Kirsten Beachy

Suffering, Prayers, and Miracles: A Family Discovers God's Healing Love

Jana Alderfer

The Testament God Gave Back

Lee Snyder

Kingsview

Pen and God Go Missing

Michael A. King

The Turquoise Pen

When the World Ends at Noon

Noël R. King

Chalk: A Story of an American Abroad

J. Denny Weaver

Beneath the Skyline

Disappointment is What I Feel: Philosophical Ramblings for a Broken World

Deborah Good

and much more

Autumn 2007

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Editorial: How Does God Work in the World?

How does God work in the world? The first set of articles in this issue of *DreamSeeker Magazine* explicitly ask variations of that question. The second set might be read as asking it implicitly.

As she ponders how God works in response to prayer, Kirsten Beachy's version of the question becomes "Is that all?" Then Jana Alderfer sees evidence that God's work includes answered prayers amid a son's great physical needs—even as she notes that healing does not come for other fervent parents.

Looking back on her childhood, Lee Snyder sees an important marker in her quest to understand her place in the "God-scheme of things": God responded to her desperate prayers by returning her prized New Testament. Meanwhile a comparably important marker for my boyhood self, and one which drew me into lifelong questioning of how God does—or doesn't—work, turned out to be the prayers not answered when my prized pen went missing.

I see Noël King's story as bridging the prior articles and those that follow. In her parable, our mundane world ends. Though she doesn't say how this happens, at least for me the implied Worker behind the event is God. But then when the new world comes, old and new get movingly

mixed together down in smelly ordinary reality.

And this moves us into the rest of the articles, which are mostly located in the ordinary yet hint at more. J. Denny Weaver tells us of cross-cultural lessons revolving around chalk. Deborah Good tells of her disappointment with humanity. Renee Gehman reports on building a life both in Vietnam and after. Mark Wenger ponders when to pull the plug on beloved computers and go back outside into the tangible world.

None of these writings focus on God. Yet all these authors I suspect are looking in the issues and lives they write of for the Worker behind their own activities, decisions, hopes, or disappointments.

In the last two articles, God remains mostly implicit. Yet even amid the stench of abuse, Jonathan Beachy hopes for Advent. And Daniel Hertzler's choice of books to review reminds us that Christmas is a key time to ask how God works in the world.

Finally the poets, in their various down-to-earth ways, speak of hands and work and healing down here. In rarely naming yet still hinting at God, they remind us that so often glimpsing how God works has to do with when and how and whether we look. —*Michael A. King*

How does God work in the world? The first set of articles . . . explicitly ask variations of that question. The second set might be read as asking it implicitly.



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IN THIS ISSUE

Autumn 2007, Volume 7, Number 4

Editorial: How Does God Work in the World?	2
Letter	
Poetry	
Barbara Esch Shisler, <i>Hands</i> • 5; Ken Gibble, <i>Calculated Blessings</i> • 11; W. N. Richardson, <i>Solitary Labor</i> • 20; Lisa Weaver, <i>Copper Coins</i> • 38; Joyce Lind, <i>December</i> • back cover	
Listen to These Voices	3
J. Ron. Byler	
Is That All?	7
Kirsten Beachy	
Suffering, Prayers, and Miracles: A Family Discovers God's Healing Love	12
Jana Alderfer	
The Testament God Gave Back	16
Lee Snyder	
Kingsview	18
<i>Pen and God Go Missing</i>	
Michael A. King	
The Turquoise Pen	21
<i>When the World Ends at Noon</i>	
Noël R. King	
Chalk: A Story of an American Abroad	23
J. Denny Weaver	
Beneath the Skyline	27
<i>Disappointment is What I Feel: Philosophical Ramblings for a Broken World</i>	
Deborah Good	
Ink Aria	31
<i>Life Building</i>	
Renee Gehman	
Community Sense	35
<i>Love, Community, and Computers</i>	
Mark R. Wenger	
Transformation: From Abuse to Advent	39
Jonathan Beachy	
Books, Faith, World & More	41
<i>What Shall We Do with Christmas? Reviews of Christmas Unwrapped and of Religion and Empire</i>	
Daniel Hertzler	

Dear Editors:

I just finished the last article in *DreamSeeker Magazine* Summer 2007, and this gives me a good reason to say what I wanted to anyway. I'm so glad you're putting out this little book. I enjoy articles that challenge conventional thinking and give us something to chew on.

I am impressed especially with William Dellinger's article, "Why I Am a Mennonite Farmer." There is so much wisdom in there. I do wonder how I, as an 82-year-old rather decrepit grandma, can fit into such a lifestyle—I like my comforts! Dellinger's philosophy pretty well jibes with my growing-up years. I didn't grow up on the farm, but we had three-and-a-half acres on the edge of Mountain Lake, Minnesota, and to make ends meet we spent all our time hoeing in the garden, selling produce from door to door, and canning everything we couldn't eat. —*Wilma Ewert Leichty, Goshen, Indiana*

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

Listen to These Honest Voices

J. Ron Byler

Readers of the DreamSeeker Magazine Winter 2006 special issue, "Toward a Genuine Conversation on Homosexuality," have had to wait patiently for the conversation to continue. Finally Cascadia Publishing House, publisher of DSM, has extended the conversation in a new 2007 book, Stumbling Toward a Genuine Conversation on Homosexuality—which reprints the DSM special issue as Part One and adds a new and much longer Part Two of 17 more chapters. To introduce the book, below are excerpts from Byler's "Last Word," a response published in full in the book. DSM readers are welcome to buy copies at special discount; for more, see the ad elsewhere in this issue. —Ed.

At San Jose 2007, the biannual convention for Mennonite Church USA last July, speaker after speaker told us how they were drawn into the Mennonite family. They reminded us of our calling within the larger Christian church to speak out for peace and justice for all people. One speaker said it this way, "Thanks for what you have given me, and please continue to be who you say you are."

Despite our best efforts to avoid the issue, homosexuality in the church will not go away, and we are

not at peace with each other. One of the reasons may be that we have not been true to our word. As several writers in this book point out, our Purdue and Saskatoon statements not only state our belief about same-gender orientation but also promise that we will continue to talk to each other about it.

Stumbling Toward a Genuine Conversation on Homosexuality is aptly named. We would still stumble, but less often, if we could find a way to talk face-to-face about this topic, rather than through books like this one. And still, I found myself laughing and crying as I read through these pages. Many of the authors are people I know and love. People whose opinions I respect dearly. So often, I wanted to say “Yes, but . . .” or “But you’re forgetting that. . . .” But we are left with words on a page rather than real-time conversation.

Yet that’s the point, isn’t it? For whatever reason, we are only now beginning to provide space in the church to talk about this issue and others that have the potential to divide us.

So let me contribute to this conversation by telling you what I think and feel today. . . .

- I simply don’t think there is enough support one way or the other to be clear about

what the Bible says (and means) about homosexual relationships. . . .

- The easy line we draw between homosexual orientation and practice feels fundamentally unfair, unjust, and impractical to me.
- Mennonite leaders have failed to live up to our agreement to say clearly what we believe about differing sexual orientation and provide safe space for the church to talk about it. We have a sincere desire to maintain the unity of the church, and we often are fearful of the things that threaten to divide us.
- Discernment happens at different levels of church—congregation, conference, and denomination—and we have not yet figured out how to reconcile them. . . .
- We should be much quicker to admit we can’t solve this issue by ourselves and more open about asking God’s spirit to guide us.

Listen to the honest voices of the followers of Jesus in this book. . . .

—*J. Ron Byler, Goshen, Indiana, is associate executive director of the Mennonite Church USA.*



Photo by Marilyn Nolt, who originally submitted the poem “Hands,” by her friend Barbara Shisler.

Hands

(For Jill at her Blessingway)

Hands are a miracle,
hold them up in awe
and praise,
joint and nerve, tendon and vein,
what they feel,
what they know,
what they can do,
what they remember.

The woman’s hands remember
first movement in her mother’s womb.
They opened to feel the air at birth,
waving and curling against the light and cold.
Tiny fists groped and pushed at a breast,
seeking a first taste, first swallow.
Pink hands danced before her face until her eyes found them,
her thumb discovered a mouth that satisfied them both.
Growing hands clutched and stroked the yellow blanket,
grabbed toys, seized her father’s finger, figured out a spoon.
Hands always clean got dirty, touched the world’s grime, resisted
washing.

More growing, and hands held the jump rope, the scissors ribboned to
the table,
crayons, the handles of the seesaw. Sometimes they folded in prayer,
slapped at a teasing brother, held the hands of friends at games.
When the mittens no longer fit, hands had grown into nail polish

and rings and guiding fabric at the sewing machine.
They grasped hockey sticks, a car's stick shift, a rolling pin.
Graceful hands, strong and supple, opened
to receive diplomas and awards, closed
on the tools of living, the pencils, pens, and brushes, knives of a
trade,
moving to make drawings, flexing to fashion building models.
Creativity flowed from mind and spirit through her hands.

Hands know about love,
touching a lover's face, running fingers through his hair,
caressing a warm body, reaching out for the ring,
the feel on the finger, the feel of commitment.
Hands joined, close and warm, in promise forever.

Hands feel eager, hopeful. Hands explore.
They search her belly for the first flutter of a baby,
rest on a rising mound in blessing for the forming child.
Hands are ready, reaching for new sensation, new knowledge . . .
reaching out to be held during contractions,
reaching out to touch and hold the gift of new life,
offering her breast, bathing and dressing, massaging and patting,
hands busy with acts of nurture, deeds of joy,
protecting, leading, comforting,
as the cycle begins once again.
A little girl's hands . . . a mother's hands . . . a little girl's hands . . . a
mother's . . .

Hands are a miracle,
hold them up in awe and praise,
joint and nerve, tendon and vein,
what they feel,
what they know,
what they can do,

what they remember.

—*Barbara Esch Shisler, Telford, Pennsylvania, is a poet and a retired pastor.*

Is That All?

Kirsten Beachy

Jabez was honored more than his brothers; and his mother named him Jabez, saying, "Because I bore him in pain." Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, "Oh that you would bless me and enlarge my border, and that your hand might be with me, and that you would keep me from hurt and harm." And God granted what he asked.

—I Chronicles 4:9-10, RSV

Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

—Matthew 7:9-11, RSV

Last year, I went job-hunting. We had a new house—and a mortgage to match. I had taken time off to finish my MFA thesis and house hunt, but now it was time to unleash my earning potential—that's how I thought of it. That's when I discovered that (1) a graduate degree doesn't mean that you'll get called for interviews doing work downtown; indeed, it might send your resume to the trash; and (2) adjunct teaching might build resumes, but it won't pay mortgages.

After searching for a couple months, I grew nervous. I returned to my alma mater and applied for a

40-hour/week secretarial job. They knew me, and they took me.

I spent a lot of time at the copy machine feeling sorry for myself, duplicating assignments to be used in the sorts of courses that I had once taught myself, back in my days as a graduate instructor. In turns, I thought of Cinderella and the martyrs.

It was silly to feel so low: I made good money, more than many people ever make, I commuted with my husband, and I worked for funny, interesting, sympathetic people. There is no shame in necessary work. My father swept chimneys, and we were proud of him. I didn't want to be ungrateful for the good job. But at the same time, I felt shattered, the pieces of myself lying strewn around the base of the copy machine.

I told myself that this was the simple result of growing up with inflated ideas about who I would be and what I could do. It took me half the year to confess that I was unhappy, to let one little whiny prayer of complaint slip past the censors: "Is this all?"

How many Mennonites of my generation find it hard to pray for ourselves? I don't like to do it. I resist it fiercely, and I suspect that others, with similar backgrounds, do too. That's counter-cultural in a country where the book *The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to the Blessed Life* tops the New York Times bestseller list and sells nine million copies.

Bruce Wilkinson's book encourages believers to pray the prayer daily for thirty days, with results guaranteed: *Oh that you would bless me and enlarge my border, and that your hand might be with me, and that you would keep me from hurt and harm.*

While the book promises spiritual prosperity along with material benefits, it's hard to get past the mountains of Prayer of Jabez kitsch—mousepads, backpacks, key chains, embroidery patterns—and the mountains of money they have made for Wilkinson and his publishing house. The idea repels me: If you pray the right prayer, God will have to bless you? It's too Harry Potter: Just wave your wand, say *accio blessings*, and watch them fly in the window.

Jesus says, "Ask and it shall be given unto you," but reality proves we can't take the statement at face value. Both theologians and popular inspirationalists are kept busy trying to explain why, when you ask and don't get, you're really receiving. The truth of "ask and it shall be given" depends on the definition of "it."

This is the first of three reasons that I resist praying for myself. "The blessings will come down as the prayers go up," is too deterministic. It makes God seem like a vending machine: insert prayer, wait for blessing to drop into the tray. When I rant about "vending machine God," one of my friends points out that there's nothing wrong with vending machines per se: If you're thirsty and have

fifty cents, you can get satisfaction. But there are problems with that picture, even when you aren't using vending machines in a metaphor. What if the soda you expected doesn't emerge after all? What will you do?

The U. S. Consumer Product Safety Commission reports that, since 1978, 37 people have been killed and 113 injured by wrestling with unresponsive vending machines. Jacob, who wrestled the angel of the Lord, got off easy with a lamed hip—not bad, compared to the intracerebral bleeding, punctured bladders, or fractured pelvises that folks get fighting the silent machines. Jacob fought for his blessing. He did not insert 50 cents or thirty days of canned prayer to gain his blessing.

A second reason I resist praying for myself: I'm a Mennonite. Our virtue is living more with less. We are aware of needs around the world, of our own comparative abundance. We have too much stuff, too many privileges already—far more than we deserve. We should be praying for mercy, not more. We're Americans, a nation of chubby, vending-machine fattened children. We need to stop getting, start giving. And on the way to the stake, we should be singing songs of gratitude.

And the final reason? Obstinacy. Conventional wisdom holds that God always answers our prayers: "Sometimes yes, sometimes no, sometimes later." Well, I don't like to be told "no." I don't want to admit the possibility of "no." If someone works for me, they'd better say "yes" when I ask them to do something.

Fair enough: That's how I responded as a secretary. I've never been good at delegating responsibility, and if God is going to be unreliable in taking care of the tasks I send God's way, I'd better keep them in my own inbox.

I wasn't born critiquing simplistic theology, cringing at abundance, and keeping control. One of my earliest memories is of asking for more.

It's the Fourth of July. I'm somewhere between ages three and seven, and we're at my grandmother's house for celebration and sparklers. Anticipation runs high. Grandma has told me and my sister that she has a special surprise for us. I don't remember whether she told us on the phone, in the car, or after we arrived, but every fiber of my being is focused on the surprise, some wonderful present, like a stuffed animal or a My Little Pony.

She takes us into the kitchen. "Close your eyes." She places something in my hand.

I open my eyes. It's a candy bar. Not the big kind. Just a little half-size Three Musketeers. "Is that *all*?" I ask, cut to the heart. I burst into tears.

My parents, who raised me right, will give me a lecture in the car on the way home about greed and gratitude. I will remember my social solecism forever, the shame of it not wearing off for at least twenty years, when the rest of the story becomes more important than my little gaffe.

The rest of the story is that Grandma came through on the surprise. She called us back into the kitchen a few minutes later. Hidden

beneath brown paper lunch sacks were two dolls from her precious doll collection. I took my china doll home, wrapped it in tissue, and hid it in a cardboard box where it stayed until this summer. My sister's doll, untainted by greediness, stood out on her dresser.

It's only recently that I have realized the important part of this story is not childish greed. It's the way Grandma saw my deep disappointment and answered my tragic "Is that all?" with a firm and convincing, "No. It doesn't have to be all. It is not all."

Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

If a grandmother, special but, after all, a mere mortal, knows how to be so gracious, how much more gracious can God be to God's little ones?

Within a week or two of my little prayer by the copy machine ("Is this all?"), the college invited me teach for a year. They even entrusted me with some classes I've never touched before. My schedule for next year is one I might have envisioned working my way into somewhere, if I was lucky, over five or ten years. I walked past the copy machine one day in February and literally felt all those little pieces of myself rising up from the floor and coalescing into something new.

Did the tiny prayer get me the job? I'm not qualified to answer that question. Was the job an answer to prayer? Absolutely. I am beginning to believe that in choosing to admit our disappointments and our wishes, we gain.

Did the tiny prayer get me the job? I'm not qualified to answer that question. Was the job an answer to prayer? Absolutely.

The act of confiding becomes confidence, a little thread of faith that it is worth telling God what we want. We often hear that strength comes from prayer, that prayer brings us the resources we need to take those last steps beyond the end of our ropes. We don't often hear that it takes

strength to pray.

That strength is even more necessary because of the unanswered prayers. For all the success of his prayer, Jabez was born in sorrow: *His mother named him Jabez, saying, "Because I bore him in pain."* My friend Dennis told us about asking his father for some new clothes when his hand-me-downs and ragged shoes were ridiculed at public school. His father's answer? Not even an acknowledgment. "Go hoe the corn."

He asked for clothes; his father gave him a hoe. Don't we pray for peace together every Sunday at church? What about hunger? What about malaria? What about our own secret unresolved sorrows?

Jesus made wine out of water, *snap!* But peace out of war? It takes a certain kind of audacity to pray for something so large, and to keep on praying, to wrestle like Jacob, to keep coming back to the gates each day, like

the woman in Jesus' parable about the unjust judge.

I'm nowhere near this; I've barely started to ask. I still need my arm twisted to admit I want something. I'm no expert, and I won't give out any thirty-day guarantees. Can I say that, if you keep asking, God will give you what you want? No. No indeed.

But keep asking.

I'm learning to believe that,

somehow, God will say, "That's not all."

—Kirsten Beachy lives, writes, and dabbles in theology in Briery Branch, Virginia. She earned an MFA in creative writing from West Virginia University. She attends Shalom Mennonite in Harrisonburg, Virginia, where her article was first shared as a "short summer sermon."

Calculated Blessings

"Bless the hearts and hands that have prepared this food" Grandpa at the Christmas feast would implore the Lord.

I and he had watched those hands —Grandma's and her daughters'— seen them at work sinewy, supple, strong, watched them kneading, pounding dough, tearing guts from helpless hens sprawled naked on the kitchen table, chopping off in merciless strokes heads and tails of carrots.

Bless these hands, he prayed and meant, I think: Lord, tenderize them like their hearts that soften when the children stub their toes and run to aprons meant for wiping tears

It is (he knew from Hebrews) a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

—Ken Gible, Greencastle, Pennsylvania, is a retired Church of the Brethren pastor. These days, instead of writing sermons, he writes poetry (mostly) and other stuff.

Suffering, Prayers, and Miracles

A Family Discovers God's Healing Love

Jana Alderfer

On one of the coldest days of winter in 2005, my two sons, my sister, and I returned home from a morning of errands. My son Sam, then almost three, asked if he could go on a quick sled ride with his aunt before going inside for his nap. I thought nothing of it being so cold outside and agreed that one ride would be okay.

Moments later, we found ourselves scrambling to get Sam inside and call 911. At the bottom of the small hill in our yard, Sam sat on the sled, unresponsive and stiff. It was clear that something was very wrong. We raced inside to get out of the cold—me holding my youngest son, then 10 months old, and my sister cradling Sam.

The ambulances arrived, and I sat amid the medics clapping and yelling for Sam to “Wake up!” I called my husband to meet us at the hospital. At that moment everything was so surreal. I wondered if this was really happening.

It *was* happening, and I prayed like I have never prayed before. Silently, I cried out to God to watch over my little boy while the medics called for the

Medevac helicopter, because minutes later he was still not responding.

After many tests at the hospital—CAT scans, blood tests, EEGs, and more—we were told Sam had experienced a seizure, but no medical reason was evident, nor did he have any pre-existing condition. He had a 50-50 chance of having another seizure. Sam was discharged the following day, December 14.

On December 15, Sam had another seizure. I found myself in an ambulance again pleading with God to protect my son. The hospital observed him, then discharged us only for us to come back yet again the following morning, December 16, because of a third seizure.

Despite being put on anti-seizure medication, we still were not given any reason as to why this might be happening to him. Over the next few weeks and months, we found ourselves in and out of hospitals, seeing specialists, working with one medication after the other (Sam was on eight different medicines!), and becoming physically, emotionally, and mentally drained.

My husband and I constantly questioned, “Why Sam?” We offered to trade places with him if God would only let us. Why was this happening? Why weren't we seeing any progress? Why couldn't anybody give us answers? Why should children have to suffer? The list goes on.

We did everything we could for Sam. We asked our church, our Sun-

day school class, and everyone we knew to pray intensely for him. They did, constantly. Our friends, family, and church put their prayers into action by providing meals, child care, rides, and more that helped sustain a healing community around us.

I found myself in an ambulance again pleading with God to protect my son.

We chose to combine complementary (alternative) medicine with allopathic (modern) medicine, even though we didn't have a full understanding how these therapies worked. We felt the need to be faithful to God's leading even if

it meant taking Sam to appointments a couple times a week.

Amid the initial chaos and adrenaline back on those December days, I felt God. Weeks later, among all the new medicines we were given to try, each one causing its own set of problems (loss of appetite, hallucinations, an eight-day hospital stay for pancreatitis), I no longer felt God's presence. It seemed as if God had disappeared and we were alone despite the outpouring of love we were receiving from friends and family who cared for us then.

Both my husband and I struggled to find answers. Sometimes in our struggle we were able to cling to each other for support, but sometimes we each felt alone.

Our faith was becoming worn out through the days, weeks, and months. It was incredibly difficult to hold on to our belief that God loves unconditionally when our child was suffering. Our wandering minds began to wonder if God had really forsaken us, yet

we were constantly reminded that God's ways are not always our ways. Even when we couldn't feel it, we were shown time and time again God's unconditional love and presence.

The days were long during this time, and I found myself craving something sacred even though I had pushed God away. I picked up a few self-help books on random spiritual topics and constantly sought spiritual advice from a few close friends. One of the cards we received during this time had this saying on the front: "In the quiet moments when everything else falls away, we see Jesus most clearly and realize that He is nearer than we ever knew."

I have often pondered this. I don't know at what point it happened, but one day during this time of solitude, I discovered God again. Even though I still felt somewhat lost and Sam was still having seizures, I knew he would eventually be all right, even if he wasn't healed. Something resonated within me as a mother, telling me that we would make it through this. I began to see light through the darkness.

It occurred to me that I was being given a chance to learn something remarkable. I had a choice. I could spend my time and energy living in the "Why us?" scenario. Or I could accept what was happening and put my energy into nurturing my family the best way I knew. I just had to open myself to receive the gifts in front of me. What possibilities and blessings could they offer me?

I began to look at things a bit differently and was grateful things were

not worse. As I looked at the other children we encountered in the hospital, I started to really appreciate my family and the life I have. I accepted the reality of my life as it was. I remember thinking, *This is the life we have been given, treasure it.* I started being completely present and learned how to live in the "what now" and "how" rather than the "why." And I began to be truly grateful for each piece of our lives, no matter how small.

Early that spring, Sam was supposed to go on a special diet to help with his seizures. Our doctors, as well as us, thought this diet would heal Sam. *This* would be our miracle.

It turned out that the diet was scheduled three different times and all three times something happened to postpone the diet. The first time, Sam got pancreatitis just a few days before we were to start it. The second time, his seizure activity dramatically decreased. The third time my grandfather, whom I was very close to, died on the day Sam was to be admitted. Clearly, God was trying to tell us something. We just needed to listen.

On a Friday in mid-May, after five months of seizures, Sam's seizure activity began to change. After having complementary therapy one day, he went from around 15 seizures a day down to just one or two. We couldn't believe our eyes; surely we were missing some! But were we?

By the following week, *all* of his seizures and symptoms disappeared. We, along with everyone we knew, prayed for the miracle of healing and believe God answered this prayer. We

were overwhelmed and began to overflow with hope.

As we approach the second anniversary of Sam's first seizure, he remains seizure-free. There is a small part of me that still wonders why this happened, but the bigger part of me lives in the what and the how and trusts God's unconditional love.

I found a small framed saying during those days of darkness, which continues to hang in our hallway: "Look for the small miracles and you'll find they're everywhere." I cling to this adage even now, because I believe that even in our suffering and struggles, we can come to know God in a deeper way if we trust in him. I am not saying it's easy. But in hindsight, I can see those small miracles that proved God was still there, even when we doubted.

Looking back, along the way there were many signs of God's warm grace extended through people of faith. Sam had people who loved him, visited him, and with whom he has relationships that will sustain him throughout life. We were given meals, cards, babysitting, visits, and transportation. We were led to a doctor and complementary practitioner who really cared about Sam and about us. And I learned to slow down enough to have the time to really play with my two sons.

A special blessing during this time was meeting and connecting with other families who had special needs children and/or children with seizure

disorders. I connected with one family in particular who also have a young son with a seizure disorder. They have been faithful to God and have also tried various treatments, but their outcome is different—their son continues to struggle with seizures after three years.

During our phone conversation one day, that mother was questioning why God chooses to heal some children and not others. For that, I have no answer. I too struggle with this. I don't know why my son was healed and hers was not. It is heart-wrenching to have a conversation with someone still on the other side while knowing that you are no longer there.

This is the hard part now and the part that still affects us, even though our son has been healed. It is the part that helps us remember what we went through and remain grateful for his healing. It is the part that helps us empathize and connect with others who are suffering.

So it is with gratitude that I can say this: As much as I hated what we went through, I cannot see the gifts God was providing us with all along. Ultimately, it was not about whether or not Sam was healed. It was about finding God amid chaos and waiting in hope.

—Jana Alderfer, Harleysville, Pennsylvania, is a self-employed mother of two children and member of Salford Mennonite Church. She hopes someday to use this experience with Sam to help others.

I don't know why my son was healed and hers was not.

The Testament God Gave Back

Lee Snyder

Walking home from school, head bent into the wind, shivering in a thin blue coat, the child is hardly aware of the dead sky or pelting sleet as she prays. As she treks down the road toward the farmhouse, the dormant fields fold into the awful silence. Even the girl's shoes make no sound against the wet stones of the graveled pavement. With a child's unmitigated belief, absorbed from life in the church community, this girl knows that God is real and means what he says.

This was my first crisis of faith, I now realize, and a marker along the way toward discovering my place in the God-scheme. I was six. My most prized possession was a maroon Gideon New Testament. One day I lost it. I was devastated. When it did not turn up after much searching, I began praying that God would give it back. My prayers became pleading, demanding. "Please God. Please God."

How many days did these relentless prayers go on? Did my mother become concerned when I asked four, five, or six times a day where else we could look? I imagine Dad obliging me when I thought of yet another place to check, down behind the seat cushions of the Chevy.

Even after Mom and Dad had exhausted every possibility in helping me search for the New Testament, I hung on to a grim hope that my prayer would be answered. Going to bed, buried in one of the family quilts, I tried to think of ways God might respond. I knew that God, so choosing, could simply open up the heavens, reach down, and return the New Testament. It was as simple as that. There was the story from Sunday school where God meets Moses but allows Moses only to see God's back. Maybe God would allow me to see his hand reaching down out of the clouds, handing me the Testament?

My prayers continued for days, with a fierce insistence and an unwavering belief that God would intervene and honor his promise, "Ask and you shall receive." While my parents knew how much I wanted my Bible back, I have no idea if they sensed the desperate drama going on between their oldest child and God. What would Heaven do with a six-year old who believed literally that God was going to give back the Testament?

God gave it back.

While the details remain hazy, it must have happened something like this: One evening a car pulled up into the driveway. A man got out and knocked on the door. From way on the other side of town, Mr. Edwards showed up at the door. "I brought something I think your little girl must have left at our place the other week when you stopped in. We found this after you left." In his hand, Mr. Edwards held out the maroon Testament.

"I was just driving over this way anyway, and the wife thought your daughter might want this back."

I did not even hear my father thank Mr. Edwards. It was not until Dad had closed the front door that I could move.

"Here you are," Dad said. "I knew it would turn up."

Mom, hearing the commotion, came in from the kitchen, drying her hands on her apron. "Where did that come from?" looking first at Dad then at me.

"Mr. Edwards dropped it off. We left it at their new house when we went over to see their house plans."

All Mom said was, "I had no idea you took your Bible along."

She went back to clean up the kitchen. Dad took up his reading. The household settled back to normal.

While that experience appears to an adult as embarrassingly naïve, I have no doubt that God answered my prayer. It was as though the heavens had opened and God had handed back my Testament.

That child-God encounter was one marker along the way of discovering one's place—a place in the God-scheme of things. Finding one's place, both literally and figuratively, reaches toward the ineffable and yields glimpses of both the imagined and the not yet in our consciousness. That place is where we start from.

—Lee Snyder, Harrisonburg, Virginia, is President Emeritus, Bluffton University, and in the midst of writing the memoir from which this story is excerpted.

This was my first crisis of faith. . . .

Pen and God Go Missing

Michael A. King

I loved that pen. I don't remember all its features, but I do remember that in the 1960s, before computers mostly turned fine pens into antiques, you could get pens with amazing technology. All sorts of fascinating inks and inkwells and pen tips and burnished metal cases combined to make the finest pens. This pen was a premiere model in 1963, when I was nine.

And lost the pen. I was heartbroken. I ached for my treasure. I looked everywhere. No pen.

So I prayed. No pen. I prayed some more. No pen. I prayed on my knees looking under carpets and beds and on tiptoes peeking across the tops of bureaus. I prayed and I prayed and I prayed some more. No pen.

An uneasy thought began to worm its way through my pen-craving mind: *What if praying is not giving me back my pen because God doesn't really answer prayers?* And not too far behind that thought was at least the germ of another one that would blossom into full expression three years later: *What if there is no God?*

I remembered the day pen and God went missing when I encountered Lee Snyder's story, "The Testament God Gave Back," of the day her prized Gideon

New Testament went missing but after much fervent prayer both God and Testament turned out to be very present. As Snyder observes, "While that experience appears to an adult as embarrassingly naïve, I have no doubt that God answered my prayer. It was as though the heavens had opened and God had handed back my Testament."

Two things strike me about our respective stories. First, both are the stories of children. These events unfold before either author has developed a mature theological framework.

Second, these are primal events with power to shape the spiritual journeys and theologies of the adults the children grew into. Snyder looks back on prayer leading to recovery of a lost Testament as a noteworthy moment in her understanding of God: "That child-God encounter was one marker along the way of discovering one's place—a place in the God-scheme of things."

Snyder speaks eloquently for me as well. Except that because my primal experience took a different twist, my spiritual journey likewise took a different twist. My own formation by the missing pen appears to the adult I am, as does Snyder's recovery of her missing Bible to her, as embarrassingly naïve. Still I can look back and see that God did begin to go missing for me the day the pen vanished.

From that point forward, I was on a path toward an atheism which eventually gentled into agnosticism and then into the paradox of a faith-filled Christian agnosticism. The vanish-

ing of the pen fanned the glowing cigarette lurking in the bedclothes of my boyhood faith: What if the reason real life seemed not to match the miracles and wonders reported in the Bible was that actually God doesn't act like the Bible says? What if the church was wrong when insisting I was wrong if I couldn't take the Bible's portrayals of God at face value?

Eventually, no doubt partly simply as an act of adolescent rebellion—its intensities satisfying to the missionary kid I then was—my questions hardened into atheism: It's all baloney. The deluded fancies of people who don't know how, as I was later to learn figures like Freud and Feuerbach put it, to live without their comforting projections of a God-figure onto a meaningless universe.

As teen years gave way to young adulthood, to college and seminary studies and beyond, I gradually concluded that faith in no god was probably no better grounded than faith in God. I found ways to draw inspiration from such a wonderful text as Hebrews 11:1, with its affirmation that "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." That allowed me to believe it can be possible to live by faith even when not entirely convinced we can know, based strictly on the evidence, whether or not there is a God.

So I became a Christian. But also an agnostic, in the sense that I've never been able to shake the primal sense that pens which stay missing

My questions hardened into atheism: It's all baloney.

may be evidence God is not there. But also a faith-filled agnostic Christian, because even as I doubt there are fail-safe ways to verify God exists, I've given my life to faith that God exists—and sometimes found the results as primally pointing to God's reality as the missing pen pointed away from it.

So in the end I do live by faith. But my missing pen has left its indelible mark on my quest for my "place in the God-scheme of things." Whereas many persons of faith seem to experience the gift of seeing easily and naturally why God of course is real, God has given me the gift of seeing easily

and naturally why of course some people find it hard to believe God is real. Thus in my life and ministries I've been particularly drawn to people who find faith hard or impossible and to the connections between faith and doubt.

So Snyder movingly thanks God for the Testament that came back. And I thank God for the pen which forced me to look for God when God went missing.

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

Solitary Labor

This winter's marked a change: no matter what I do my hands get cold. I finish my morning coffee and grip the still-warm cup, its heat transfer scant help for what lies ahead—clearing brush from a fence row.

When I was a child, Dad warmed my small hands between his large ones. "Sure, work's plenty," he'd say, "but we've got all the time in the world." Though Dad never wore gloves, his hands were always warm. The good there was in that I never knew until my father lay in his coffin, those large, strong hands of his no longer warm. I always knew I'd have to work alone but never that the day would come so soon.

—*After two decades of college teaching and bicoastal urban living, W. N. Richardson, Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, retired his Ph.D., reclaimed lost rural roots, and moved to Pennsylvania.*

When the World Ends at Noon

Noël R. King

Two days ago (on a Saturday, just before lunch). . . . Because I wished to spend my last few hours in peace, I did not tell anyone else about the email I'd received ("The world will end today. Prepare"), nor did I forward it.

My neighbor, when the tremors first started, said, "Dear God, what is happening?"

I yelled over to her, "The world is ending." (*Thank God, I added under my breath.*)

It did, right then.

Now that it is gone, it hardly seems the time to write of it, for who will care? But here I am, with all that made it through with me: blue blanket, grapefruits in the bowl, computer on my lap, a ribbon in my hair.

I sit here waiting for the lights to blink back on and show me new terrain.

For I am certain that must be the case, that a new world must bang into being when the old one blows up, for sure.

Here come the lights! I am so thrilled! My world is new again; I get to start all fresh again, all right again.

My door's in front of me. Oh, joy; oh glee! "Open, sesame!" I laugh, with great anticipation and a thrill. Who has ever deigned to fling the door wide open on a fresh new world before? Who will ever fling this way again?

Wait a second here, right by this door flung wide (and swaying in the breeze). . . . Isn't that my smelly old neighbor there, across the yard? What is *she* doing here, in this nice and fresh clean world?

And if I squint, is that my trash all blown across the walk and not blown up, away, and gone for good?

Uh-oh. Something is very wrong here. Very very wrong. Mailbox: full of bills. Driveway: same old car. Broken finger joint from long ago: still broken finger joint from long ago. (Ouch, it hurts! I must have banged it during The End.)

I hate my job! I hate my house! I hate my life! Uh-oh. Aren't new worlds supposed to have new thoughts?

I am going to sit here for a second on my stoop and think about all this. Oh no! Here she comes, my mean old smelly old neighbor, crossing right across the yard. Where can I hide? How can I run?

What? What's that she's said to me? "You're happy, what!" I nearly yell once more. "You're happy *I'm* still here to be your friend?"

Maybe this is a new world, after all.

—*As circumstances warrant, through her Turquoise Pen column, Noël R. King, Scottsville, Virginia, reports on strange and wonderful things, including ends and beginnings of worlds.*



Chalk: A Story of an American Abroad

J. Denny Weaver

Falling abruptly into my schedule of classes with no introduction to how things worked in the Algerian education system presented me with a bewildering series of problems. They were highlighted by my adventures with chalk.

The first hurdle, before I even got to the chalk, was simply finding my classes. It was during the Vietnam War, and I was in Algeria as a conscientious objector to war, doing a term of alternative service with Menonite Central Committee's Teachers Abroad Program. My assignment was to teach English as a foreign language in a public *lycée*—high school—in a small town in Algeria.

I arrived for school on the first day of class, idealistic but apprehensive. I was a remarkably inexperienced teacher, having had no education courses or teaching experience in college. The language of instruction was French, and I would be using the French we had spent the last year learning. Although anxious, I was also eager to use my newly acquired French and demonstrate my ability to function in that language.

The only orientation I received to my school setting was a list of the English classes that I would be

teaching. I arrived on that first day to the sight of several hundred students milling about over a large, enclosed court yard ringed by classrooms. Timidly I asked another teacher where I would find my classes. I learned that they were “over there somewhere.” That was how I learned that in this system, a class of students used the same room all day and the teachers walked from room to room between classes.

I made my way “over there.” A bell rang, and students lined up in front of their rooms, waiting for the teacher to arrive. I walked down the line, asking students in each line if they were my section. Of course, each class joyfully responded, “Oui, Yes!” Eventually I did discover the room of the class that I was to instruct for first period, and I ushered them in.

Thus began my crash course in learning about teaching in an Algerian lycée, including my introduction to the chalk problem. Teaching a foreign language involved lots of writing on the blackboard, which required a lot of chalk and an eraser—seemingly obvious equipment for a classroom. I observed that the other teachers always seemed to have that equipment, but my rooms somehow lacked these obvious instructional tools. On more than one occasion, I tried to stretch a centimeter-long piece of chalk through an entire period while erasing with a wadded-up piece of notebook paper for an eraser.

After several days with minimal chalk and no eraser in my classes, I decided to take the initiative and solve the problem myself. I went to see the

principal to ask for my own eraser that I could carry around with me in my book bag.

He gave me a quizzical look, which suggested that it was an unusual request. He also said something about having a responsible person get it for me. I replied that I really did want to have my own eraser—if I carried it myself I could always count on having an eraser.

The principal granted my request. That he had to search for a while to find an eraser further demonstrated that my request deviated significantly from normal practice, but finally he found an eraser. I thanked him profusely and went happily on my way.

The next step was to locate the source of chalk. It turned out to be in the office of the dean of students, located handily in a room adjacent to the classrooms. On my way to class every day, I could drop in and pick up chalk. Again there was mention of having a responsible person pick up chalk for me, but I explained that I preferred to do it myself, so that I could be certain that I would always have chalk. The dean of students agreed. Again I expressed my gratitude and departed happy, my problem solved.

But the solution was not what I thought it was. I was still a long way—and a number of other mistakes—from learning that, in that culture, it is impolite to disagree with or say “no” to a guest. And I was clearly the guest in Algeria of the principal and the dean of students.

I put my eraser and chalk in a plastic bag, and it became a permanent ac-

cessory of the book bag I carried to class everyday. After that bit of problem-solving, I never again went through a class with only a centimeter of chalk and a wad of note paper for an eraser.

I was delighted with my problem-solving ability and impressed with what individual initiative could accomplish in the face of seeming indifference to details and good organization. I was delighted—until I found out what was really happening.

I no longer recall the circumstances, but in the last week of the school year, I learned what I had missed. Blame it on my less-than-perfect understanding of French. I had heard something seemingly obvious all year without realizing that my assumption of meaning was far off the mark. The magic phrase was *responsible person*. In French, an adjective used alone becomes a noun. The principal, the dean of students, and other teachers had mentioned “*le responsable de classe*,” for which a literal English translation is “the responsible person of the class.”

When the principal and dean of students had mentioned having the responsible de classe get chalk and eraser, I had presumed that they were simply suggesting that I pick a responsible student and ask that student to get eraser and chalk for me. My assumption was quite wrong. In fact, “*le responsable de classe*” was the title of a designated individual in each

class. In our system, we might call this person “the class secretary.”

Le responsable de classe for each class was chosen by the dean of students. Le responsable de classe had assigned duties. Those assigned duties included the job of keeping the eraser for the class and picking up chalk for the professor from the office of the dean of students.

While I spent the year admiring my initiative and efficiency in having chalk and eraser every day, each of my classes of students was secretly laughing. They were enjoying my ignorance of the system and my inability to ask a student—le responsable de classe—to perform a simple task for me.

I laughed with the students at my ignorance. They had fooled me, and they deserved my acknowledgment of their year-long ruse.

But the following fall, I was ready. After the first class had filed in on the first day of school and I had given them permission to be seated, the first thing I said was, “Who is le responsable de classe?”

A timid hand slowly raised itself.

I asked the boy to stand. He stood.

I asked to see the class’s eraser. He showed it to me.

I pointed at the corner of my desk nearest the door. In an authoritative voice I said, “Every day when I come in the door, I want to see the eraser and four new pieces of chalk on that corner of the desk. If those items are

I was delighted with my problem-solving ability . . . until I found out what was really happening.

not there, you will have four hours of detention. Do you understand?”

Le responsable de classe said, “Oui, Monsieur.”

I repeated that scene in each of my classes that day. Just as was the case the previous year, for this year also I had an eraser and chalk every day.

A couple days into that second year, some students clustered around my desk and asked where my sack was with the chalk and eraser. I laughed and said that this year I knew better, I did not have it any more. One smiled and said, “Oui, Monsieur, this year you know how to control the boys. C’est bien.”

On occasion, I even entered into their system and helped them manage it. Every couple weeks as I was approaching the room for the next class, two or three students would intercept me and explain in hurried and excited voices, “The Thirds stole our eraser, and we know you’ll be upset if you don’t have the eraser, but it’s not our fault. What shall we do?”

I never figured out whether these “borrowed” erasers were actually mean or merely amusing tricks they played on each other. Either way, I responded, “That is not my problem. All I know is that when I come in the door, I need to see an eraser and chalk.” Then I found important reasons to stop and converse with another teacher before I got to my room, giving my class plenty of time to “organize” for my coming appearance when I would enter the room and discover once again an eraser and chalk on my desk.

It took more than a year to discover my ignorance and to arrive at what—I think—was a solution to the chalk problem. I still shudder at the thought of how many other mistakes and faux pas I never learned about.

This ignorance opens the door to another conversation—the one about how United States policy blunders in the Middle East are frequently fueled and exacerbated by ignorance and misunderstandings of Middle Eastern languages and culture. Statements by Palestinians have been frequently misread in the U.S.

In exponential expansion of my ignorance of the “responsible de classe,” cross-cultural ignorance and misunderstanding of face-saving comments and gestures, likely by both sides, undoubtedly contributed to both U.S. wars on Iraq. Becoming even slightly aware of the number of people who have died in these conflicts because of cross-cultural misunderstandings and ignorance is quite a sobering realization.

—*J. Denny Weaver is Professor Emeritus of Religion and the Harry and Jean Yoder Scholar in Bible and Religion of Bluffton University. He and his wife served with MCC in Algeria in 1966-68. Weaver reports that he and a student from one of his classes have recently been in contact by e-mail. He looks forward to sharing this issue of DreamSeeker Magazine with the student at an upcoming conference at which they plan to meet after all these decades.*

Disappointment is What I Feel

*Philosophical Ramblings
for a Broken World*

Deborah Good

What to say. *I am well; we are all well.* I wanted my short email home to open like a window, offering a glimpse of the deeply troubling world I was visiting. The date was June 6. The location: Jerusalem.

The days are full, which has likewise filled our minds and conversations with new information, anguish, confusion, hope, and utter hopelessness at the situation here—which truly has more parallels to apartheid, and to the domination of Native Americans, than I ever before understood.

I was on a two-week learning tour in Palestine and Israel. We stayed at the very southern edge of Jerusalem for the first week, and from the roof, I took pictures of the not-so-little town of Bethlehem, which lay just to the south.

Whatever peaceful images I’d had of a quiet town sleeping beneath a shining star have been shot to high heaven. In reality, Bethlehem today is a prison. The Palestinian city is surrounded by walls, fences, Israeli-only roads, and settlements of homes built by Israelis

on land confiscated from Palestinians without approval from the international community.

All of the occupied West Bank has been similarly cut to bits by walls, fences, checkpoints, roads, and settlements, making a “two-state solution” all the more hypothetical. Violence springs from within these isolated enclaves of Palestinians like leaks from a clogged sewage line.

I am learning a lot, I wrote, becoming passionate and angry, and wondering, as always, if there's any way to take that anger back with me to the United States (which, by the way, has fed the occupation here with 100 billion dollars of Israeli aid since 1948) and do something productive with it.

Many maps of Israel, drawn by Israel, do not demarcate the area internationally recognized as the West Bank, showing only splotches of color where Palestinians are given some civil authority. I took a pen to one of the travel maps we were given and sketched, as accurately as I could, my own kidney-bean-shape outline of the Palestinian territory on the west bank of the Jordan River. This was not only an attempt to educate myself; it was a tiny act of protest.

The suffering caused by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict runs deep as the oceans and, with a little interpretation, extends very quickly into Syria, Lebanon, and, of course, Iraq. If we really tune in, I believe it extends into every one of our living rooms and daily routines. Still, just about everyone I met during my short stay in the Middle East—Palestinians and Israelis alike—treated me with kind-

ness and generosity.

I have been trying to explain for myself how these things happen. It seems to me that most of the people in the world are good-hearted, well-intentioned, and wonderful to each other most of the time. How is it, then, that Israeli settlers can throw rocks at children on their way to school? How is it that Palestinian teenagers can be convinced to blow themselves up in acts of gruesome retaliation—and absolute despair?

“This has to stop,” wrote Rachel Corrie in one of her last e-mails to her parents. Corrie was killed in 2003 by a bulldozer, while standing between it and a Palestinian home.

Disbelief and horror is what I feel. Disappointment. I am disappointed that this is the base reality of our world and that we, in fact, participate in it. This is not at all what I asked for when I came into this world. This is not at all what the people here asked for when they came into this world. This is not what they are asking for now.

I recently heard these words spoken from a stage, in a play called *My Name is Rachel Corrie*, which was adapted by Alan Rickman and Katharine Viner from the young activist's writings. I'm always hunting for words that help me make sense of my life, and one of hers is very appropriate. *Disappointment* is what I feel.

It's a familiar sensation, the same skin-to-bone incredulity that hit when an indigenous woman in

Guatemala described for me how paramilitaries tore into her community and picked up children by their ankles, swinging them against walls like baseball bats. I felt it too when I read in the paper just last week about a young man killed in a Philadelphia neighborhood shooting.

The question that grows up inside me is this: Do people act in both wonderful and un-

speakably hurtful ways because we are by nature good or bad—or because we are guided by our upbringings, our access to resources, and the social structures in which we live?

Much of my life, I have held tightly to a belief that human beings, at their core, are good. Talking over beers with a friend earlier this summer, I put it this way: “One of the bases of my understanding of the world, I think, is that all people, in their given contexts, are doing the best they can with what they've got.”

That base is becoming shaky for me, or at least more ambiguous. Whether we're cooking supper, paying our taxes, or fighting a war, just about everything we do causes an incalculable mix of joy and suffering in the world. We are imperfect, no doubt. But we mostly do what makes good sense to us, and there are reasons—stated and unstated—for our actions. We act out of love. We act out of greed. We act out of fear, convenience, and desperate need.

The problem is that the collective whole of our micro-actions, even if individually well-intentioned, have

added up to create destructive macrosystems and a planet plagued by pollution, widespread inequality, and unending violence.

I still think that it is extremely rare for someone to be motivated primarily by a desire to cause harm.

Never judge others before trying to understand their “why.”

I therefore say this: Never judge others before trying to understand their “why.” Asking “why?” is essential to breaking cycles of violence and retribution. *Why*

are there suicide bombers coming out of Gaza? Why is Israel building walls in the West Bank? Why did several men, over the years, threaten my dad with weapons and demand money? And why did I, just yesterday, ignore the woman who asked me for help on the street?

Most things have explanations—societal and personal. This never means that terrible acts are justified, but it does mean that the judgment of others should always happen in conversation, though it so rarely does. Before any pacifist points fingers at military leaders for their participation in the war machine, it is crucial that we try to understand why they are there. And what if we, as a nation, had not jumped to point fingers and retaliate after the tragedies of 9-11 and had instead asked, “Why did this happen?”

These, dear reader, are my brief philosophical ramblings for a broken world. I have already exceeded the 1,000 words I was given to write, yet I have hardly begun. The story of global wrongdoing and injustice is more complicated than I know enough to tell, and yet here I am. I live

amid that story—we all do.

Sometimes, in Guatemala, Palestine, or on the streets of Philadelphia, I am indeed disappointed. I expect more from humanity. I want to demand it. But disappointment is only part of the story. I am learning that even as we work to change all that is toxic, unjust, and unbearably wrong in the world, we must be on the lookout for beauty, for insight, for gratitude. If we keep our eyes open, if we peer into every sidewalk's cracks and into the eyes of the people we meet, we will—by golly—always, always find it.

—*Deborah Good, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, is a Master of Social Work student at Temple University. She realizes this edition of her column is quite heavy and recommends following it up with a romantic comedy and a good bowl of ice cream. But then, keep on reading, researching, and living, full of passion and conscience. You may want to start by reading "An Open Letter to Mennonite Church USA Congregations" at <http://peace.mennolink.org/resources/palestineletter/>. She also welcomes your thoughts and arguments at deborahagood@gmail.com.*



Life Building

Renee Gehman

People ask me what was different in Vietnam, and I've found the most accurate and succinct answer to be . . . *everything*. But I recently got excited over the discovery of a *similarity*, when I woke up to the sound of machinery tearing up the road in front of my house at home here. Because in Vietnam, one of the many things that woke me up in the morning—along with a rooster, my host brother's cell phone alarm clock, and more—was *also* the sound of building.

A group of about 12 people lived under tarps set up on the lot next door to where I lived in Vietnam. They spent the whole year building a house down the alley. As the days went by, and I passed the house on my bicycle enroute to work, I observed the brick, the cement, the metal, the wood, and in the end, the drywall, the glass, and the paint—all becoming part of the house's structure.

Our lives go through structural changes too. Like a house, our lives are comprised of various materials one might also call "sub-lives." I'm talking about personal life. Family life. Social life. Work life. Love life. Spiritual life. On any given day or week or decade, certain of these sub-lives are more prominent than others, are affecting us more than others, are changing more than others.

But coming to Vietnam felt like the entirety of what I'd built out of these sub-lives had been demolished. Suddenly it felt like all I had built in those first 22 years of life had been flattened down into a foundation, more tightly even than my belongings had been compacted into two 50-pound suitcases. There I was, left to build something anew.

Early on it became clear that *this* was going to be a *very* different house. At home, personal life had been huge. And academic life. Those were the domi-

nants in the college years. Social life was more for summer, but that was there too, and spiritual life kind of melded in with everything, since I was at a Christian school and all my friends were also Christians.

In Vietnam I had to build in a work aspect—my 9:00-to-5:00 position at World Publishers. This part of building was mostly pretty easy. Every day I showed up, read articles and book manuscripts on Vietnamese culture or history or economics, and repaired the English. Sometimes the articles were difficult to understand:

In the recent years, in spite of there were many companies which produce computer program have taken many necessary measures to protect their products by themselves, along with the strengthening of inspection, detection, fine activities of competent authorities but the results were still not sufficiently.

But this kept the work challenging. Other times the word choices were just very bizarre:

Onion with peanut oil is also used in another 'on the brink of extinct' specialty of Quang Nam—bloating fern-shaped cake. The cake peel is rather thick, dust with peanut and onion, the stuffing of the cake is made of mince shrimp. Then put the cake into dry stream.

But this kept the work fun.

As work was built into my life's structure I learned where I needed to be flexible with the material. Naturally there was some awkwardness. This could include anything from learning to take naps on

the office table during lunch break to adjusting to editing without deadlines. (In Vietnam, maintaining harmonious relationships is vital; to give me a deadline might hurt the boss-employee relationship by implying that I wouldn't finish my work in a timely manner if left on my own.)

But the construction in the work arena was minor; by far the most significant, most time-consuming, most beautiful and ugly and strong and shaky part of the life I built in Vietnam was my family life.

Building relationships with family members in Vietnam was a struggle, because even though I loved them and even though they were so good to me, cultural differences made it hard for me to believe they *really* cared. In hindsight, I would say that the love between the Nguyen family and me was real, but differences in expression or limits in communication blurred it with doubt.

Suddenly it felt like all I had built in those first 22 years of life had been flattened down into a foundation. . . .

It was love with a measure of hurt and sadness. The language barrier was a daily source of much laughter and joking, but it also prevented me from ever expressing myself fully to these people I loved. Vast differences in accepted styles of communication were so strong that I know many things I said or did must have hurt them. And every day, never knowing it, they did or said things that hurt me.

Vietnamese people emphasize what Americans would call flattery, making seemingly false observations that can make Americans uncomfortable. We tend to prefer "being real"—whatever offense this may cause—and are offended by people we may experience as bending the truth right to our face.

Because I found it hard not to see the Vietnamese style as building people up with flattery and white lies, I found it hard to trust them. If the flattery felt like lying to my American self, then it was hard not to feel the love too must be a lie.

I cherished the couple of times, toward the end of the year, when I caught my host mother with tears in her eyes. When I asked why she was sad, she said, "I was thinking about you going back to America, and how much I'll miss you." In those brief moments I felt this heavy weight of skepticism lifted and could believe the love was real.

Into the complexity of this structure I also tried to fit a spiritual life. In the very beginning, it felt strong, perhaps even stronger than ever. When I came to Vietnam, suddenly everyone I had

gone to in times of distress was gone. For the first time I had absolutely no one to turn to, at least not anyone who knew me. The only One who knew me, who would be there no matter what, was God. And in my lack of anywhere else to turn, in my helplessness and fear of this new place, I felt a desperate and genuine need for God which carried the refreshment of something new I had never quite experienced.

But as I began to grow closer to my host family and felt more and more at home in Vietnam, the building started to slow down. I started to find that my spiritual life just didn't fit in there like it did at home. I wasn't surrounded by Christians, but by people who practiced a mixed religion of Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and ancestor worship. I didn't have friends my age I could talk to about faith issues whenever I needed to, or young adult meetings to go to like I do here.

Pretty soon, every moment at home was spent with the family, and I had no alone time. This meant no time to read the Bible or to just sit and pray. Usually if I tried to be alone, my family seemed to think I didn't want to spend time with them. Then I felt guilty for not being with them.

So a lot of the time I felt something was missing in this area, and I wasn't sure what to do about that. I still have trouble assessing the concept of a "spiritual life" and how I built that or should have built that into my life in Vietnam.

At home now, what was missing is gradually coming back, particularly

the personal life and social life. I'm still waiting on the work life, but hopefully that too will come soon. It feels good to come back to this old house, this old life. Of course, having been away for a year, there is repair and renovation to consider, but I am eager to carry this out with the new material I now have to work with.

I can't tell you how the house turned out—is a house ever really finished? Here at home, it's hard to get a clear look at what I built back there. I know I built *something*, because at the least I made a life for myself.

But how much of the building did I leave standing there, or what of it is standing in me? Do I have to give up the Vietnam house now that I'm back in my Souderton one? Is there some

way I can still occupy a bit of both?

Where are the remains of this thing I built, and what was the quality of construction, I wonder? What about the material I chose to use? Was I mostly using straw or hay? Something that wouldn't last? Or was there enough stone and quality workmanship to help it stand the test of time, even where I can't be to live in and maintain it? I wonder.

—*Renee Gehman, Souderton, Pennsylvania, is assistant editor for Dream-Seeker Magazine. This article is an adaptation of a sermon she gave at Salford Mennonite Church upon her recent return to the USA. Her life, once again, is currently undergoing heavy reconstruction.*



Love, Community, and Computers

Mark R. Wenger

“How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.” I regaled my wife at our wedding reception by reciting this poem by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. I wanted to surprise and honor her—and did. That will be 23 years ago in December 2007. During the intervening years, the ways of loving her have multiplied. And so have, I'm sorry to say, the ways of hurting her.

It was during the year when Kathy and I married that I made use of a personal computer for the first time. Before that time, the computers I knew were big machines, housed in special rooms, instructed by punch cards and operated by a specialist of electronic esotericity (wizardry). My first personal computer task: prepare a job resume on a friend's machine. It was a frustrating experience; I could have done it much faster on my manual typewriter.

All that has changed, of course. A few years after our marriage, we bought our first computer, a Toshiba T1000SE. We've gone through six or seven machines since then. Last month I ordered a green laptop for a daughter going off to college. No, the iPod or iPhone bug has *not* bit me, but I write while connected to the computer universe with high-speed WiFi.

“How do I love thee, dear computer? Let me count the ways.” There are almost too many ways to count. But let’s try, for just the last week. There’s the national and international news; I’m an online news junkie. I located a replacement car radio/cassette player—cheap—on eBay for our 1995 Honda Accord; my daughters are happy again, happy to take the car to college. I do a lot of our banking and family finances with a computer—spreadsheets, making deposits and paying bills, tracking investments.

How do I love thee, computer? The list goes on and on: listening to music; swimming through floods of email; looking at photos of a family trip to Israel and Palestine; getting a map and directions for driving somewhere; searching for the words of an old hymn; checking out videos of Mitt Romney and Hillary Clinton on YouTube; researching a new battery for an old mower. And that’s just off the top of my head. What would the list look like if I’d actually tracked the activities for seven days? How many hours have I spent “on the computer?” Probably too many.

Here’s the question: After 23 years of both, what do loving my wife and loving my computer have to do with each other? Answer: Not much. Almost nothing, in fact. Which is just the point. Too often loving the computer competes with and sometimes erodes loving my wife. Oh sure, we exchange romantic email notes and occasional e-cards. But love between people, friendships that *really count* over time,

is rarely cultivated through the medium of a computer.

I can almost hear howls of protest; my college-age daughters would probably join the chorus of complaint. What about the social networking sites like Facebook? They build friendships and community! What about instant messaging? It’s a great way to stay in touch at all hours of the day! What about online games where you can compete with people all over the world?

Think of all the communities of similarly interested persons who can link up with each other online, like parents of autistic children or friends who enjoy hopping freight trains. How about those dating services that introduce potential mates to each other? The computer is a wonderful tool for building community, learning to love people, bringing people together! Isn’t it?

I don’t think so. You want love, you want community? Turn off the computer and get out. See people, spend some face-to-face time, rub shoulders, go hiking, discuss a book across a table, coffee mug in hand.

A *Newsweek* cover story (Aug. 27, 2007) features Facebook and its creator Mark Zuckerberg all of 23 (born the same year of my wedding and first computer foray). Facebook works with the concept of a social graph—the people-connections with those you care about. These are your “friends” who can post status reports, photos, videos, and comments you can see. If they are your “friend,” they see what you post. It’s an ingenious

way to stay in touch with acquaintances and colleagues; Zuckerberg hopes its appeal will reach far beyond high school and college students.

But I’m still not convinced that a computer connection does much to develop real community, lasting and vital human relationships. One testimonial in the *Newsweek* article sings Facebook’s praises: “As Facebook grew up alongside of us, it improved our collective social lives—all 1,042 friends of mine and counting.”

Curmudgeon that I am, this sounds like an echo hall for informational promiscuity. Friendship an inch deep and a mile wide.

Then there’s the website called Second Life I came across in the news. In this 3-D virtual world, “residents” create their own digital self—an avatar. These avatars can explore a vast digital continent, interacting with other virtual residents. Residents can build homes, create digital objects whose rights they retain and can buy, sell and trade with other residents. Your avatar can fall in love with another, have sex, and raise a family. Since 2003, over 8 million people have become residents. Not me.

Turn the computer off. Call up some real friends. Go out shopping, go bowling, go to church. Hanging out at the health club or even the local pub will have more genuine flesh and blood potential for authentic and lasting relationships than trying to figure out the best chin angle and hair style for your Second Life avatar or the music to greet your friends on Facebook.

Get to know the real residents in your community; attend your local municipal events. There are more than enough real people to fight, love, visit, and serve without escaping into a narcissistic digital universe filled with thousands more.

Turn the computer off. Call up some real friends. Go out shopping, go bowling, go to church.

Since I’m in deep, let me keep digging. Just today I heard Lee Snyder, a seasoned former university president (see her article earlier in this issue of *DSM*) warn the faculty and staff at another university about

email. “With email, it is so easy to fire off a sharp note and copy a bunch of people in the process. That kind of thing created more hard feelings among co-workers during my tenure than just about anything else.” What has happened to the telephone, to being a good conversationalist, and to working through a disagreement while breathing the same air?

And I haven’t even said anything about computers and pornography, or gambling or anything more poisonous to relational trust and truth.

Computers expand productivity and enhance power. They really do. But I don’t believe they contribute much to enhancing love or building community. Someone once observed that there is an inverse relationship between power and love. I agree. Where power dynamics are amplified, love tends to disappear. Where love is fostered and put into practice in relationships, power issues recede.

So you want love in the real world? You long for community of people,

for lasting friendships where you can laugh and cry together? A place to belong? Turn off the computer, look around, get out of the house, hang out with people you can look in the eye. You just might find who and what you are looking for.

Copper Coins

The man who approached my table was shoeless, shirt full of holes—
Unclean, unsteady, around his waist he'd wrapped a towel.
I kindly gave the juice for which his outstretched hand had asked
I watched as he drained the sweetness to the end.

I wondered about his life—
What steps had brought him to this place?
Was it three strikes from birth?
Or choices that he'd made?
I wondered where he'd go from here—
How did he plan his days?
Or was it whatever came his way?

Then his eyes looked right into my own
“Is there more juice?” he simply said.
My heart ached for I'd been told
One cup is all each person gets.

But this man was among the worst I'd see all the day
So I reached for his cup to drain the pitcher away
But his eyes had followed down the line where mine had led
And he carefully set down the cup that he had held—

“No thanks,” he smiled and gently said.
“Save that for someone who hasn't had any yet.”

I couldn't help but think of the story Jesus told
About a widow with two coins who gave more than gold.
That day I left the shelter, humbled by the man
Of whom Jesus spoke two thousand years before.

—*Lisa Weaver, Madison, Wisconsin, is author of Praying with Our Feet (Herald Press). Note: This scene rolled around in Weaver's head for fifteen years before it found its way onto paper. This incident in a soup kitchen occurred while she was on a three-week Mennonite Youth Venture assignment during high school. This piece can also be sung, as a melody wove itself into the text during the writing process. (Scripture reference: Mark 12:41-44)*

—*Mark R. Wenger, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, is Director of Pastoral Studies for Eastern Mennonite Seminary at Lancaster. He wrote this column before he turned off his computer.*

Transformation

From Abuse to Advent

Jonathan Beachy

In autumn of 2006, former Congressman Mark Foley and Charles Roberts, killer of the Amish girls at Nickle Mines, Pennsylvania, shared secrets . . . secrets that statistically are not unknown to many of us. Even the Amish, who because of Roberts' atrocities were thrust into the public eye and rightfully admired, are not exempt from being victims or perpetrators of sexual abuse.

The consequences, as demonstrated by these two men, are mirrored over and over in the stories heard by those of us who try to make sense of the horror that too often follows later in the lives of such persons.

In my poem, “The Stench” (*DreamSeeker Magazine*, Spring 2007), I screamed out against the winds of denial, winds that wreck havoc on those within their reach.” But even as I scream, in the midst of rage and / Pain, comes the awareness that manure / Is redeemable, useful to me and others,” I observed that the stench is not partial to persons of one culture or social standing, or limited to the lowly, or that academically elite persons are exempt.

Finding sufficient healing for transformation to take place, to carry that message to the manure-spreading farmer I introduced in the poem, is hard but

also essential if one is to avoid the consequences of internal death or death acted out against others.

Both religious and social scholars use the term *demons* to describe the torment that affected Roberts, but reining them in is no easy task, nor is there a quick and effective panacea. As Anabaptist dream-seekers we can and must find, in our roots and branches, the road to transformation.

When I first came to recognize fully, as an adult, the consequences of sexual abuse that occurred late in my childhood, the power of confession of my powerlessness and need for trusted others in my community of faith became paramount. Ongoing accountability to control the demons that still lurked within was and is crucial. Realizing that no exorcism would forever free me, but that I needed to be part of a healing community so that I too could offer healing when I experienced adequate restoration, was truly freeing.

Metamorphosing, moving from abuse to the anticipation of arrival, an advent, in my personal life, is incomplete. . . .

Metamorphosing, moving from abuse to the anticipation of arrival, an advent, in my personal life, is incomplete and will be until my final transformation. But that anticipation provides hope, courage, and desire to allow others to find the road to transformation also.

If you have been either a victim or a victimizer, you must know that there is hope, that restoration and transformation is possible.

Don't wait until the demons within destroy you or others. Don't settle for a quick fix or a band-aid for a wound that is deep and possibly crusted over.

God help all of us truly to become a community of hope, of love, and of forgiveness that reaches out to transform, to restore, and to heal.

—*Starting in 2005, Jonathan Beachy has lived in San Antonio, Texas. For most of his professional life as a registered nurse, he has been privileged to accompany persons misunderstood and rejected by the society that envelops them.*



What Shall We Do with Christmas?

Reviews of Christmas Unwrapped *and of* Religion and Empire

Daniel Hertzler

Christmas Unwrapped: Consumerism, Christ and Culture, edited by Richard A. Horsley and James Tracy. Trinity Press International, 2001.

Religion and Empire: People, Power and the Life of the Spirit, by Richard A. Horsley. Fortress Press, 2003.

What shall we do with Christmas? A question many of us ponder on occasion. I must confess that there are aspects of the Christmas season which I enjoy. The festive spirit, perhaps. The opportunity to visit a performance of the oratorio "Messiah." People cheerfully wishing me a "Merry Christmas," whatever that might mean. And at the end of December, if there is money left in the account, one can make a special contribution to have it included on the current year's income tax report.

But when we back away and look at the celebration of Christmas, we find ample evidence for the first thesis of *Christmas Unwrapped*: that Christmas as cele-

brated in North America is a secular holiday with religious trappings. The concern of the book is to show what is really going on.

This package of essays takes its departure from an earlier book, *The Battle for Christmas: A Cultural History of America's Most Cherished Holiday*, by Stephen Nissenbaum (Knopf, 1996). That book provides evidence from the nineteenth century on how Christmas came to be a family holiday instead of a celebration of banditry. These writers take it from there to show how in the twentieth century the American Christmas became a commercial holiday with a religious overlay.

As described by James Tracy, the domesticated Christmas developed from the work of an elite New York group called the Knickerbockers, who included Washington Irving. Their message was contained in Clement C. Moore's "'Twas the Night Before Christmas." The aim of this poem was to change Christmas from a rowdy celebration, when gangs of the lower classes demanded gifts from the upper crust, to a family affair, when parents gave gifts to children. The transformation probably succeeded beyond their wildest dreams. The result, says Tracy, has been the development of consumer capitalism.

While the culture Americans had previously built within an economy hovering near sufficiency was marked by an emphasis on frugality, self-control, and delayed gratification, the

culture of consumer capitalism in an age of industrial overproduction is typified by excess, indulgence and immediate gratification. The advertising ethos has been furthered and strengthened by the advent of ever more powerful vehicles for the dissemination of the faith—radio and television. (14).

The domesticated Christmas developed from the work of an elite New York group called the Knickerbockers.

So there we have it. Christmas is presented to us as a religious holiday, but the religion it actually promotes is consumerism. There is a two-month extended celebration of this faith, from Thanksgiving until the Super Bowl. Is this something we did not already know? Perhaps not, but the "unwrapping" in the book is impressive, and the effect is cumulative.

The book moves through four parts from "The Formative History" to "The Culture," then "Saviors, Messiahs, Biblical and Other," and finally "Theoretical and Theological Reflections." As one finishes each part of the book, it seems the point has been made, but there is more.

The spirit of Christmas, these writers remind us, is the spirit of consumption. Whereas at one time Christmas gifts might have been handmade, today it is expected that they will be bought. "Christmas spending, which an American Express survey put at just over \$1500 per person in 1999, is a climax of annual consumption patterns, but is not an exception to them" (100).

All of this is supported by film and theater. Of particular interest are

movies such as *Holiday Inn*, *Miracle on Thirty-Fourth Street* and *It's a Wonderful Life*. Also the musical, *White Christmas*. It is pointed out that the message of all of these is for people to take their "places" in society as subservient persons and particularly as consumers.

Chapters 6, 7, and 8 are written by Richard Horsley, who has given special attention to the political and economic aspects of the cultures in which Jesus and the early church lived. He knows particularly the commonalities between the religious celebrations of earlier empires and our own Christmas celebration. He points out that when Jesus was born there was already an empire-wide celebration. The savior it was set up to honor was the Roman Caesar. "And it is that festival, honoring the Roman emperor for bringing peace and prosperity to the empire, which bears a remarkable resemblance to the elaborate American Christmas holiday festival" (114).

Horsley says that our modern individualism, voluntarism, and separation of church and state have tended to keep us from recognizing the significance of the emperor cult in Jesus' time and how the early church presented Jesus as a counter-savior.

It seems ironic that the bishops of the Christian Church that came to worship Jesus as their Lord and Savior—in an effort to displace or replace the worship of Caesar as savior with the worship of Christ—established Christmas as the holy day honoring Jesus' birth at the time of the winter solstice,

which had become the standard season for the imperial festivals. (135)

Even so, Christmas was not a big operation until it happened recently in America. "Only in the twentieth-century did most mainline Christian churches embrace the holiday festival" (136).

While chapter 7 in the book depends on the gospel of Luke for biblical documentation, chapter 8 uses Matthew. Horsley perceives that the story in Matthew 2 is "clearly not about spiritual salvation but about political struggle" (139). With this in mind we get a new view of the coming of the Magi and the slaughter of the innocents at Bethlehem. Horsley reviews the case of Herod "King of the Jews by the Grace of Rome" (142) and notes that "Herod's Jewish subjects never really acquiesced in his rule" (146).

Horsley observes that despite extended and repeated repression by the powers of the empire "and the providential care of God, Jesus survived to launch a movement of renewal as the Messiah and the new Moses. . . . The movement that finds expression in the gospel of Matthew . . ." contends Horsley, "persisted in its attempt to structure life in communities that stood up against and provided an alternative to the Roman imperial order" (159).

If we think the point is already made, we are constrained to review one more section in the book. In part four, Horsley first compares devotees of consumer capitalism, the religion of

Christmas, with the status of peasants in ancient Mesopotamia. Then Max A. Myers contrasts the grace of Santa Claus with Christian grace, and Paula M. Cooley discusses the irony of a public nativity scene that became an issue of religion in a public square.

Horsley proposes that in ancient Mesopotamia, the peasants were expected to serve the gods. Meanwhile in modern America “The Force that now determines our lives is capital, and the holidays constitute the religious festival of historically unprecedented scope in which we serve the Force with the value of our labor in fantastic rituals of abundance and consumption” (184).

Myers points out that the grace of Santa Claus is not compatible with Christian grace. “The gifts that Santa Claus brings are signs of ultimate favor, but they are merited as are the gifts of coals or switches for the bad. . . .” In contrast, “In Christianity . . . all of existence has a character of a gift and tends toward the most harmonious and just good for all” (195).

Cooley begins her discussion with reference to a suit over a public nativity scene. The suit went all the way to the Supreme Court, where the majority ruled that the nativity scene was not an endorsement of Christianity. Instead it was held to be a secular statement. Cooley says that “At present, Christmas practices tend to exemplify by default, if not by intention, loyalty to a national religion that authorizes an empire rather than one whose birth and death challenge the building of empires. . . .”

Cooley goes on, “For all of us,

whether religious or not, can there be the cultivation of a critical, penultimate yet deep loyalty to one’s country that acknowledges the authority of prior and different royalties to transcendent realities” (215)? And, we might add, can we as Christians celebrate Christmas as Christians?

The little paperback by Richard Horsley makes the same point as the book above, but it does it in fewer pages and provides additional material on the relation between religion and empire. It goes as far back as classical Buddhism and illustrates “how, in various ways, imperial relations determine not only political-economic life, but also the conditions and possibilities of cultural identity and religious expression” (5).

In part two, “Religion in Resistance to Empire,” Horsley describes the examples of Judaism and Christianity, then moves on to Iran and the modern revival of Islam. He discusses at some length the role of the United States as the “Great Satan.” Without thinking about it, we may conclude that this label is simply a negative title, but as Horsley points out “In popular Islam the ‘Great Satan’ plays the role of a tempter who draws men away from obedience to God and into sin and destruction” (68).

With this perspective we receive an additional insight regarding why modern Iran has been negative to the United States. “Iranians revolted against the Shah, but they identified United States as the ultimate source of the corruption—a role it played well” (69).

In his final chapters, Horsley reviews “The Roman Emperor Cult” and “Christmas, the Festival of Consumer Capitalism,” in which he covers ground similar to what he does in the larger book. As a final prophetic word, he observes that

Modern Christians and Jews have made various compromises with consumer capitalism. Yet the service of capital in the consumption of needless commodities that are merely images or fetishes of desire drives an increasingly unbalanced and unjust distribution of goods in the world that is now dominated by America and American Imperial power. (134)

Either book will do. Grab whichever one is most readily available.

I was impressed some years ago by Bill McKibben’s little book *Hundred Dollar Holiday* (Simon and Schuster, 1998), which proposes that we keep our Christmas giving to that limit. My wife and I have not found ourselves able to keep it down to that, but last year we happened on the scheme of buying a water buffalo for Heifer International in the names of our grandchildren along with modest cash gifts to them. One granddaugh-

ter had already preceded us in this method of gift giving. Another went to India and made it a point to see a water buffalo.

As I was writing this review, the Salvation Army was asking if we could do an extra day of bell ringing in July. In its own way, Salvation Army bell ringing is part of an alternative celebration, but it rides on the train of the Christmas orgy.

So how does a church make a statement in favor of Jesus and against empire? Give to the Salvation Army? Buy a Christmas tree with a fund-raising appeal for the poor and disenfranchised? Maybe.

But as Christmas Unwrapped says over and over, Christmas itself is a clever scheme imposed upon us for selfish commercial purposes. As Horsley points out, the Forces which oppressed the Mesopotamian peasants have morphed into Consumer Capitalism. We are invited to do obeisance by engaging in an orgy of buying followed by a year-along payment of the bill at 18-percent interest. As Christians, we are invited to support a vision more exalted and enlightened than this.

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

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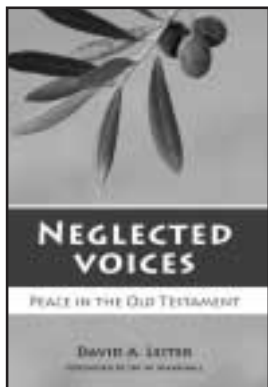
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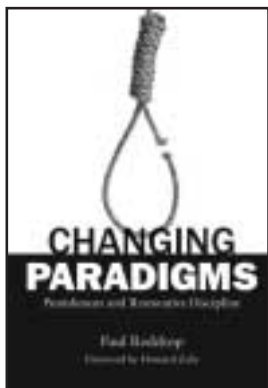
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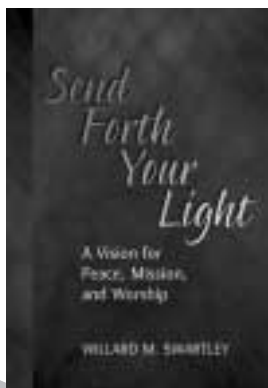
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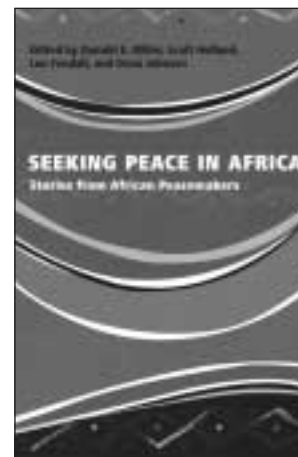
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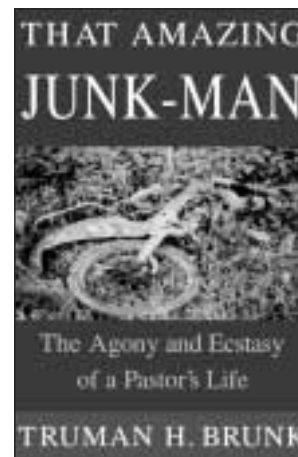
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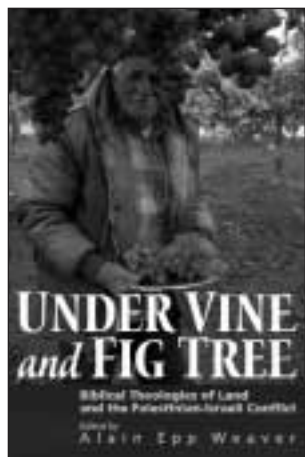
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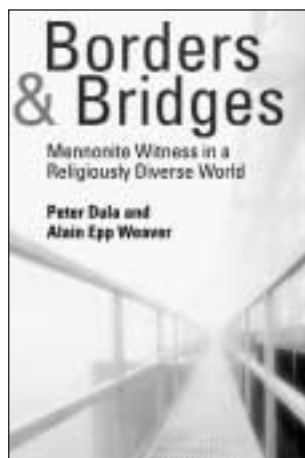
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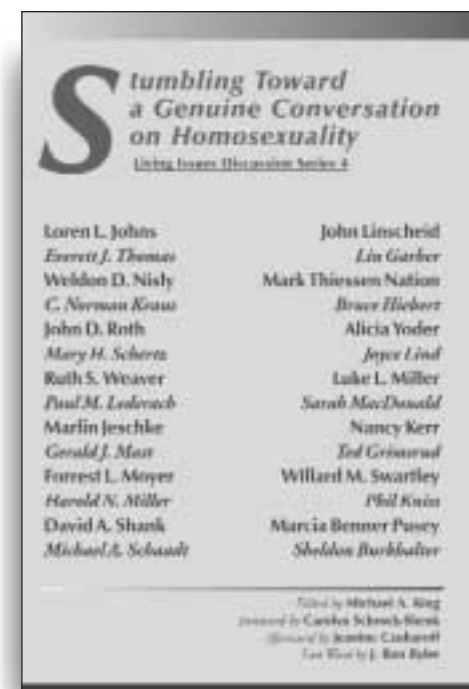
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December

I feel December coming on
like an impending head cold
Resigned to the fact
that I have to let it run its course
Aching and tired
I just want to stay in bed.

The chills come in waves
remembering Decembers past
Cold darkness
Piercing winds that reach
under protective layers
cutting to my very core

A pillow over my head keeps out the light
Huddled under the covers I shiver
and wait

I wake in the night
The fever and chills gone
My health restored
the virus conquered by unseen forces
dwelling in my veins

I look outside
into the dark night of late December.
Stars sparkle
The crisp air no longer chills me
A brisk breeze blows my hair
The world appears sharper, clearer

As the December sky fades
to new year's dawn
I stand up and
stretch

ready to face the day

—Joyce Lind is a mother, teacher, and musician who lives in Harrisonburg, Virginia. She is pursuing an M.A. T. in Early Childhood Education at James Madison University.