



Loving Bella Every Day

Rose Decaen

Making Music with What I Have Left

Carolyn Schrock-Shenk

Sojourns and Confessions of a Compassionate Racist

Mel Leaman

Respecting a Racist

Benson Prigg

Beneath the Skyline

Taking Root

Deborah Good

Chocolate and Easter

Carole Boshart

The Turquoise Pen

Pockets of Death and Elephants

Noël R. King

Community Sense

A Case for Family Care

Mark R. Wenger

Spring 2006

Volume 6, Number 2; ISSN 1546-4172

Editorial: Loving When It's Tough

The prior issue of *DreamSeeker Magazine*, Winter 2006, generated intense interest. *DSM* readership doubled or tripled according to such measures as hits on the online version of the magazine or several hundred special orders of the hardcopy version by individuals and congregations. Feedback included occasional formal letters or longer responses to the editor, requests for the conversation to continue, and criticisms that some viewpoint weren't represented.

In light of such factors, the conversation will continue, but not in the limited space available in *DSM*. Instead, to honor the significance of the conversation and give it more elbow room, the articles published in *DSM* Winter 2006 will form the core of a Cascadia Publishing House book likely to be released late this year or early next.

Also included will be letters and responses the Winter 2006 *DSM* generated plus new chapters giving voice to more authors and perspectives. As soon as the book is ready, a future issue of *DSM* will report this. Special thanks to the many *DSM* authors and readers whose interest in the conversation is enabling it to continue.

Loving When It's Tough

Now to this Spring 2006 issue. The "Brokeback Mountain" review continues the Winter 2006 conversation. Otherwise this issue on the surface shifts back to more typical *DSM* content. Yet there is continuity in

DSM Spring 2006 revolves around the quest to love life and each other when it's tough.

spirit: I think and hope that the heartbeat of the conversation on homosexuality is the question of how we offer love when it's hard to discern the loving way. Meanwhile *DSM* Spring 2006 also revolves around the quest to love life and each other when it's tough.

That quest is evident in the moving article by Rose Decaen on coping with fear of losing her adopted child Bella by loving her every day. The quest is obvious in Carolyn Shrock-Shenk's account of searching for fresh ways to love life when so many of her

old ways of loving it are taken from her. And the challenges and gifts of loving each other across races are insightfully explored by Mel Leaman and Benson Prigg.

Then Deborah Good ponders what to do with time and grief now that she can't love in this life the father taken from her. Noël King's parable can be read many ways; I experience it as inspiration to nurture pockets not only of death but also of living love. Carole Boshart believes we can come to love both the bitter and the sweet of chocolate and Easter. Mark Wenger calls for families to love their elder members by opening wallets. Greiser reflects on cowboys who fall in love.

The books Daniel Hertzler reviews address consequences of two peoples loving the same land. And poets Joyce Peachey, Clarissa Jakobsens, and Larry Moffitt evoke love across eras, differences, and death.

—Michael A. King

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

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

Free online:
www.CascadiaPublishingHouse.com/dsm

DreamSeeker Magazine is published quarterly in spring, summer, fall, winter.
Copyright © 2006
ISSN: 1546-4172 (paper)
ISSN: 1548-1719 (online)

IN THIS ISSUE

Spring 2006, Volume 6, Number 2

Editorial: Loving When It's Tough

Poetry

Joyce Peachey Lind, *Scenes from the Market* • 23
Clarissa Jakobsens, *Walking Backward* • 5;
On Earth • back cover
Larry Moffitt, *Farmer Brown* • 37

Loving Bella Every Day 3
Rose Decaen

Making Music with What I Have Left 6
Carolyn Schrock-Shenk

Sojourns and Confessions of a Compassionate Racist 12
Mel Leaman

Respecting a Racist 18
Benson Prigg

Beneath the Skyline 25
Taking Root
Deborah Good

Chocolate and Easter 29
Carole Boshart

The Turquoise Pen 32
Pockets of Death and Elephants
Noël R. King

Community Sense 34
A Case for Family Care
Mark R. Wenger

Reel Reflections 38
"Brokeback Mountain": A Parable of the Conversation
David Greiser

Books, Faith, World & More 41
The Pen, Mighty or Not
A Review of Justice and Only Justice and Bethlehem Besieged
Daniel Hertzler

Loving Bella Every Day

Rose Decaen

My husband and I adopted a beautiful baby girl a few years ago. Her birthmother, Anne, had picked us. After looking at numerous profiles of waiting couples, she saw our picture and she knew we were the ones: the ones who would parent her child and love her with a love which, I am learning, doesn't have any room for fear.

We met Anne shortly after our daughter, Bella, had been placed with us. We wanted to meet Anne, to see where this angel of ours had come from, to thank this woman who had given us *life* (an impossible thing, I know now).

Now that it was going to happen, a million thoughts raced through my mind, the most nagging one being, *What if she wants her back?*

But in a moment, I had the answer to that: Of course she does! What mother does not want to be with her child?

Then in the next moment, I knew that my fear didn't matter. I knew that my love for Bella, and even for Anne, was greater. And I was amazed. For once in my life my love had silenced my fears.

In those four hours we spent with Anne, watching

her hold our sleeping beloved one, a lifetime passed. We fell in love with Anne as we heard her story, her reasons for choosing us, her hopes for Bella. We fell apart as we tried to tell her that Bella was the best person who had ever happened to us. Toward the end, words failed us.

As Anne put Bella in my arms, she said, "I am just the mom. You are the mommy now." She turned to go and began to sob.

I felt my heart cry out, *Love Anne, too. Love her well.* So I stepped toward the door, held out Bella to her, and said, "I think she needs another kiss."

Anne turned and smiled; she kissed Bella on the forehead, then rushed out the door. What that last kiss cost her perhaps I'll never know. That she was choosing love over fear I do know.

The day passed. The months passed. Pictures and letters were sent to Anne. No answers ever came, though I invited her to write. The date for her annual visit came and went; still no word. She was beginning to fade from my mind, though she was always in my heart.

Then came the day not so long ago when love and fear had to contend, again. Out of nowhere we received a call from our social worker at the agency: Bella's birthfather, John, and Anne were a couple again. He wanted to meet Bella (he had never seen her,

though he had known she was his child).

My world was rocked. A peaceful, sunny afternoon was suddenly dark. Fear was back. For a few days it was all that I tasted and breathed. Somewhere in the recesses of my mind I heard, *But what of love?* And only my fear answered, *But what of loss and pain and ache that has no end?*

In those days of waiting to hear of a meeting, I was a distant mother, I think. I held Bella and cared for her; I played with her and took her for walks. But I could feel myself trying to put distance between us. Ridiculous. As if anything I did or didn't do could lessen the love I have for her.

It was my husband who broke through the fear to find me. He spoke about how meeting with Bella's birthfather would probably be a good thing for all of us.

"*But what if . . .*" I asked, not willing to put the unthinkable into words.

"Then we deal with that," he said. "But think about what this will mean to Bella, to know that her birthfather wanted to meet her, to see her, to hold her, to let her know she was loved."

So it was that I came back to love again, that I looked at my daughter and imagined her 15 years old, asking questions, needing answers. "So my birthfather wanted to meet me but you didn't . . ." Love. I couldn't escape it. I peeled away the fear; I felt raw. I

agreed to move forward to arrange a meeting with John.

As before, the days passed. Now the months have begun to pass. Still no word. No phone call returned to the agency regarding a meeting with us. What does this mean? I'm not totally certain, but I know that John must have been . . . afraid.

What does this mean for me? That I live every day to the fullest and love Bella so much that sometimes my heart feels as if it will burst. That I will be open to whatever is waiting ahead

on the road. Will John contact us again tomorrow—or next month—or next year? We can't know. I do know that to meet Bella, to share a few hours of her life, is the only way that her birthfather can show his love for her now. And I know that I can't deny my daughter love—not mine or anyone else's.

—Rose Decaen is a free lance editor based in southern California. Decaen, her husband Chris, and Bella recently welcomed baby Isaac to the family.

Walking Backward

—Look as long as you can at the friend you love,
no matter whether that friend is moving away from you
or coming back toward you.—Rumi

We walk along crumbling blacktop
the afternoon sun shyly layers my rugby tee.
Three geese straddle Sunny Lake
awkwardly letting go of everything
they waddle on new ice.

Last Sunday, father and son slid the hill.
Today this slope is painted brown.
Birds know the first day of March,
they chatter about wind spreading
winter news from tree to tree.

Blackened snow promises
luscious emeralds. My daughter's pace
quicken, walking backward in front of me
I follow with desire.

—Clarissa Jakobsens

Making Music with What I Have Left

Carolyn Schrock-Shenk

If someone had told me in college that I'd become handicapped in my 40s, I wouldn't have believed them. I was athletic—a farm girl more comfortable climbing trees, milking cows, and wrestling my brother than cooking, cleaning, or even studying. My family was very active as I was growing up, and my world was dependent on my physical abilities.

I also got good grades in school, but that wasn't valued in my family the way physical abilities were. Even after childhood, our family gatherings have continued to be very active—from volleyball to crazy relay races. Along with hard work, activity is what I learned to value highly.

In 1980, when I was a senior at Eastern Mennonite College (now University), I encountered what I believed only happened to other people. I was in a car that rolled down a steep embankment in the middle of the night. That began a journey that has intensified over the years, with the last several years being the most grueling yet.

After the accident I was told that my back injury should have paralyzed me—my surgeons called me a miracle after they operated and saw the damage. I said

then that I believed I wasn't paralyzed because God knew I couldn't handle life in a wheelchair. While I may have ultimately been wrong about that, I am deeply grateful for almost 25 more years of walking.

Several years after my injury, I began to notice weakness in my left ankle that caused an uneven gait and occasional tripping. I gave up running and skating. Some years later a marked limp made me give up tennis. Then my balance became too precarious to withstand hitting a ball; I gave up volleyball.

Those losses were all accompanied by a fierce denial that served me well and kept me focused on what I could still do. By summer 2003, however, I only had biking and a kind of hobbled walking left. I fell a lot. On some days I had excruciating pain.

I was forced to begin thinking about the possibility of losing my mobility altogether. After months of deliberation and the discerning help of friends and family, I underwent a risky, two-step surgery to try to stop the degeneration. Paralysis was a possibility, but I didn't really think it would happen.

The two surgeries in Miami turned into six, with months of hospital stay. Though my legs had no sensation when I finally came home from the hospital, I had a fair amount of function left. I was thrilled and immediately began physical therapy. I was sure I would walk again. My neurosurgeon didn't think it was possible; I knew I could prove him wrong.

But the weeks stretched into months and, despite hard work, I

made little progress. Finally the truth began to sink in. While my upper body strength let me drag myself behind a walker for a few yards, I would never walk functionally. I would spend the rest of my life in a wheelchair. I plunged into a terribly low place. I pled for healing. I begged God for it. I couldn't imagine surviving life if I couldn't walk.

Healing was on my mind from the moment I woke in the morning to when I fell asleep at night. And in between. Many times I squeezed my eyes shut and willed my legs to regain their strength. I truly believed it could happen. *"Ask and it shall be given you."* *"If you have the faith of a mustard seed."* *"The lame shall walk and the blind see."* *"Will God not give good things to those who ask?"*

But it didn't happen and I finally gave up on healing. I stopped begging. I resigned myself to life in a wheelchair. I began to focus on adjusting to what that meant.

My adjustment attempts were short-lived however. After another small surgery to address a new cyst on my spinal cord, everything seemed to fall apart. Through all of that semester, while attempting to teach one class, I encountered one physical challenge after another.

Then the most devastating blow: Over several weeks, just after borrowing an exercise bike to strengthen my legs, all of my remaining leg function leaked away—and with it went trunk muscles that enabled me to balance while sitting. I have no movement left in my lower body. These losses have made negotiating life in my wheel-

chair exceedingly more difficult; I grieve them deeply.

It was after these losses that my image of God took a real nosedive. What kind of cruel trick was this? What kind of God would allow me to be kicked when I was already down? I found myself thinking of God as a punishing God, one who gives—or at least allows—the exact opposite of my desires and prayers.

One day I was sitting on our deck thinking about what it would be like to be blind. I remember feeling a deep gratitude for my eyesight. My immediate next thought was, *I can't let God know how much my sight means to me or I'll have it taken away too.* Of course my head knew that that kind of thinking was flawed, but it came from the deep grief within me.

I no longer wanted to live. The life I had been handed—a wheelchair and a constant stream of new problems—didn't seem tolerable. Death seemed the only way out. Plus I was sure my family and friends would be better off without the added burden I had become. I again pleaded with God, begging God to let me die. But that didn't happen either, and eventually I gave up on dying as well.

Not long after this I decided to stop asking God for anything. Anne Lamott, in her book, *Traveling Mercies*, talks about two kinds of prayer: "Help, help!" and "Thank you, thank you." I had been praying the help kind for a long time, so I decided to abandon those and simply thank God for the things I could truly be thankful for.

That commitment to "thank you" came more out of giving up on "help" than it came from the inherent goodness of thanking God. Even so, I suspect the act of gratefulness began to do a little healing work on its own.

Indeed, there was much to be grateful for when I allowed myself to notice: the love from so many that surrounded me; wonderful, competent doctors; analgesics that took the edge off the pain; anti-depressants that took the edge off the despair; a beautiful setting in which to heal; good health insurance; the use of my hands (I'm so grateful for the use of my hands) and much more.

More recently the problems have decreased, and I am slowly becoming stronger and healthier. I am very grateful. Despite yet another two surgeries to address an infected shunt, I have some new physical and emotional energy. A wonderful hand-pedaled bicycle and learning to drive with hand controls is adding to that—as is being back on campus.

This new energy is enabling me to continue the work of adjusting to my very changed life. That adjustment is requiring a major identity change. Even through the years of gradual loss, I understood myself to be fast-paced, full of energy, self-sufficient, able to multi-task, a risk-taker. But those characteristics no longer fit....

Part of my former identity was my commitment to peacemaking. I am passionate about peacemaking because I believe reconciliation with God and with each other as human beings is the essence of the gospel. But

periodically in the last 25 years, and particularly in the last few, I have been almost completely consumed by my physical health—at the expense of my passions. And though I am growing physically stronger, my identity now includes being handicapped and will continue to require lots of energy.

I AM more than just the chair I sit in—much more. And I hope to embrace some of my passions again. At the same time I am aware that being a "crip," "handicapped," "physically challenged"—whatever you choose to call it—is now as much a part of who I am as being white and female and heterosexual. And it will always demand energy-sapping accommodation.

Being physically challenged means I must constantly deal with issues of dependency. I was fiercely independent in every way that I could be before landing in this chair. Now I am having to learn the hard lesson of being helped and having things done for me—day after day.

I am constantly second-guessing how others feel about the extra work I represent. My attempt at some independence in transportation has had its own unexpected problems. Several weeks ago, while navigating my electric wheelchair from my house to the college, I got stranded. My aging, second-hand chair just quit—and sat on the sidewalk beside the hospital.

After considering my limited options, I began waving and motioning

to motorists who were turning into the hospital drive several yards in front of me. Six to eight vehicles passed by without stopping. *What institution did she escape from?* they may have thought. Finally two nurses on their lunch break walk called security,

who brought me a cell phone so I could call someone to rescue me. (I have since become the humbled owner of my very own cell phone, as well as a new electric wheelchair.)

Interactions and social activities, as a person who is waist high to most adults, have shifted. I remember an experience at a church assembly some years ago. I was standing, talking to an old friend about the state of the church. He was eight or so inches taller than I, though that was not problematic initially. Before long we were joined by two other men friends, also quite tall. The conversation continued comfortably for a bit. Then slowly I began to realize that the current of words, questions, and ideas were flowing above my head.

I pictured myself jumping up and down to be included, though of course I didn't. The experience was disempowering. I felt small—a diminutive version of my real self.

That image has come back to me often now that I am in this chair. So much interaction—conversation, eye contact, facial expressions, singing, prayers—all happen at a level over my head. It is not anyone's fault; it is just

**I AM more than just the chair I sit in....
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the reality of living like this in a walking world.

I am needing to rework my body image. My body has ceased to do what I have expected it do and to look how I have wanted it to look. It is no longer celebrated for its capabilities. My body has become something to be examined, X-rayed, and puzzled over by medical personnel.

My body now presents me with a host of new problems I must manage: pressure sores, contractures, circulatory problems, digestive difficulties, shoulder stress, and more. My body is lifted, carried, touched by friends who would never touch "normal" people in the same way. Many people do not perceive those with a disability like mine to be sexual beings anymore. We are still sexual beings, though indeed, we all need to find our way in this.

I am needing to reconcile the deep longings in my soul. I miss so many things besides walking. I miss the ability to do things fast and cram a lot into a day. I miss the feel of a good foot rub and water on my body. I miss playing soccer with my sons and leaning over to kiss them good night. I miss running errands, gardening, traveling with ease—and the potential for leading cross-cultural student trips. I miss visiting friends and family without being carried up steps. (Check out how many houses don't have steps.) There is so much more and I ache with these losses. I am working to grieve them, then let them go.

How would I summarize what I have learned so far? It's hard to distill the learnings, because my journey is still

so much in process. But a few things come to mind.

I have learned that life doesn't always turn out as we expect. John Lennon said "Life is what breaks in on you while you're busy making plans." Indeed, sometimes the gap between our plans and dreams—and reality—is huge. Bigger than we could have imagined or believed we could handle.

Which leads me to a second learning: Lament, whether it's in the form of anger, grief, or doubt, is good. It is honest and cathartic. And it is very biblical. Check out the laments in Psalms the next time you're feeling low. A third to a half of those chapters are laments of some kind. They are full of pain, anguish, fist-shaking anger, and even accusations. "Why, O Lord," mourns Psalm 10, "do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" . . . "Why are you so far from helping me? . . . God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but I find no rest." Not only can God handle our lamenting, but I believe God also honors it and holds us gently as we rage and cry—whether we can sense it or not.

I have learned in a new way the critical importance of community. I have been surrounded by so many caring people, including this college community. This cloud of witnesses has been God's love incarnate through these difficult times. There are so many people in this world encountering challenges much worse than mine—and doing so with little or no community support. I hope to never take this gift for granted.

I am learning that people—friends and strangers alike—generally re-

spond to differences like mine out of a good place within them. Of course there are exceptions, and those exceptions are what get noticed and make news. But I believe that people's responses to me as a person with a disability generally come from understandable, healthy curiosity or empathetic caring.

I don't want people to "walk on egg-shells" around me—afraid of saying something insensitive or politically incorrect. My disability is now a basic part of me, and I don't mind being asked questions about it. Nor do I mind people around me standing to sing or pray or dance. I am doing all these things with you—inside.

There is much more I have to learn, much growth that still needs to happen. I have not yet seen God—or goodness—in the reality of this chair. Nor am I a bit grateful for my paralysis. Perhaps that will change one day, perhaps not. I do not understand God's role in suffering and healing and I am coming to terms with the ongoing mystery in that.

What I am clear about, however, is that God specializes in helping us mine the gold from these difficult situations and that much good can be part of my future. I am trying to trust that this life, so very different from what I wanted, can be rich and meaningful and complete. And that it can be a blessing to others. While I get glimpses of that occasionally, I am not there yet. But I hope I am on the way.

The story is told (though its sources and exact factuality are hard to pin

down) of the night of November 18, 1995, when violinist Yitzhak Perlman slowly made his regular trek across the stage, with his braces, crutches, and painful limp a testimony to his childhood polio. He settled into his chair, signaled to the orchestra and began to play. Then—a string snapped, and the music stopped. The audience waited, knowing he would have to make his way laboriously back across the stage to find a replacement string or another violin.

Instead, Perlman did the impossible: he began to play with only three strings. Improvising, recomposing the piece as he played, he finished the performance, drawing powerful, awe-inspiring music from that violin.

As witness Jack Riener of the *Houston Chronicle* is said to have reported on February 10, 2001, Perlman smiled into the wild applause that greeted his finale, "wiped the sweat from his brow, raised his bow . . . , then he said, not boastfully, but in a quiet, pensive, reverent tone, 'You know, sometimes it is the artist's task to find out how much music you can still make with what you have left. . . .'"

My prayer is that I can somehow make music with what I have left.

—In fifth grade, Carolyn Schrock-Shenk, Goshen, Indiana, was the fastest runner in her elementary school. She is writing a book on Where God Went Wrong: Ideas for the Second Time Around and is Associate Professor of Peace, Justice, and Conflict Studies at Goshen College.

Sojourns and Confessions of a Compassionate Racist

Mel Leaman

The swooshing sound swirling above my head captured imaginative scenes of little David slaying the giant. I was somewhere deep in the Serengeti plains, about to release my stone with incredible accuracy upon the head of a wild beast. Supper was about to be slain and those gathered would be enthralled by the skills of this young hunter.

The instrument that sparked my fantasy was my father's slingshot. It had been uniquely fashioned by tribesmen who depended on instruments like this as well as crudely sharpened machetes and blunted clubs to kill the animal needed for the next meal. Although I didn't know how to use it, I held the awe of my neighborhood friends who wielded tiny Y-shaped sticks with glorified rubber bands.

My weapon, so the accompanying stories went, could bring down large game with one well sited projectile. A leather pouch was attached to a 10-foot cord that was twirled above the head. The experienced

hunter knew the exact moment to release, so the stone shot straight for the designated target. Dad tried on numerous occasions to imitate the finesse and accuracy the natives had so successfully displayed. However, there couldn't have been an animal big enough for him to hit!

Early in their marriage my parents joined the Mennonite Mission Board. They took a ship to Tanganyika (now Tanzania) in 1938 to take the good news of the gospel to those bound by the bad theology of their traditions. Three of my older brothers were born there, whereas I became the benefactor of adventurous tales and intriguing artifacts.

These people were natives to me—a name often used by my parents. My mental images were of men in streamlined thongs racing across open plains while bare-breasted women worked the fields and fed their families.

These men and women should have known better! Chiefs practicing polygamy, medicine men plotting suspicious concoctions, diviners who knew nothing of the divine, and ill-clad dancers honoring the dead—they all should know better!

The Dark Continent needed the light of Jesus. Dad and Mom heard the call to Christianize and culturalize the native. These were a backward people bewildered by the wiles of Satan. Quite innocently, this earnest response of Christian compassion partnered with complicity. The subtle alliance of the two implied that Africans had nothing to lay at our feet, even as we had everything to offer

them. White Americans convincing black Africans that the white man's faith and lifestyle was superior could not help but feed a racist mentality.

It would be easy, in these days when criticism can be in vogue at the expense of fairness, to draw some rather negative conclusions about my parent's commission. As Chinua Achebe vividly points out in his noteworthy book *Things Fall Apart*, many times the missionary did not understand either the religion or the culture of Africans. They insisted that to hold unto Christ, the Africans must let go of the cultural rituals, customs, and beliefs that maintained their society. Christian missionaries opened the doors for colonization and quite naturally supported, if not sacralized, Western ways.

My students at Lincoln University, the oldest historically black college in the nation, are sometimes shocked, if not angered, by the words of Rev. John Miller Dickey, who founded our school. Describing his earlier work with African slaves in Georgia, he noted that he "took opportunities of speaking to them at their funerals, which they always attend in the night, and with many African heathen customs."

Dickey stated in a sermon in 1853 that

The colored people of this country seem to have been sent by Divine Providence that they might be Christianized and employed as laborers for the evangelization of Africa. It is true, they are degrade, and

many of them in bondage, but why should this discourage us? Are they always to be children, and to have no part in the building up of the kingdom of God? Are they less able than we, when properly instructed, or less willing?

A year later Ashmun Institute was founded, then renamed Lincoln University in 1865. The first three graduates became missionaries to African countries.

Some students resent having their ancestors designated as "heathen" and refute Dickey's determination that Africans were "degrade." They argue that African Traditional Religion has always had a reverence for the High God and that the practices of soliciting the help of that deity through prayers to other divine ambassadors or ancestors reflected, rather than diminished, that respect.

The dances that offended Western eyes were not proofs of erotic paganism, but a sacred means to catch the eye of the High God or to appease an ancestor who had a closer connection with this God. They contend that the communal aspects of African Traditional Religion, as well as the spirit world, were grossly misunderstood by missionaries.

I should note that there is not unanimity amongst my students in regard to the consequences of Christian missions. Some concentrate on the callous stripping of a foreign culture, while others applaud the fact that Christianity positively addressed the fears of witches, discontented ancestors, and other superstitions.

My wife and I have had the pleasure of boarding either Christian or Muslim students from various African countries for the past three years. While they acknowledge the ignorance of the missionaries and their complicity with the throws of colonization, they also affirm the light of God's love that freed their ancestors from captivity to "heathen" customs. An African colleague once told me that even though some Africans outwardly express hostility for missionary affronts against their faith and culture, they may be inwardly grateful for the education and enlightened perspectives of faith and lifestyles these missionaries brought with them.

The mission movement was founded on a compassionate Christ, and most missionaries let this love be their guide. While in some respects they could not separate themselves from the culture of their birth, they attempted to maintain a genuine sensitivity to the African way of life.

John E. Leatherman was a friend of my parents. He commented in the February 1938 edition of the *Christian Monitor* that

learning to know the native is one of the missionary's biggest jobs, and a lifelong one too . . . We say with emphasis that he who regards the negro as an essentially inferior race and on a lower "rung" of the so-called evolutionary ladder is not cognizant of many facts, and is automatically ruled out as being incapable of gaining a fair understanding of the native.

I am proud of the deep love of God and the desire to spread the gospel that motivated my parent's sojourn to the mission field. On their return, these same commitments motivated my father to pastor a small Mennonite congregation in York, Pennsylvania. Dad was in the touch-up ministry: he slung a paint brush by day and saved souls by night. He served both professions well.

The voices for civil rights were graduating from whispers to roars, however. News of the movement was somewhat muted at our house because we did not have a television. The word *native* was now relegated to those on the Dark Continent while "colored" or "negro" became the preferred reference for African-Americans.

My images had to change. Inasmuch as our family and church related to African-Americans, their distinctiveness seemed to center on need, not color. We gave them clothing, money, and rides from the city to our suburban Bible school. Every summer for two weeks a bunch of black-faced boys and girls would clamber excitedly onto the bus to fill the pews of a white man's church. As I stared out the bus windows, I silently wondered why they lived in buildings that looked like one long house with lots of doors and postage stamp lawns. Where did they play?

My mother periodically mentioned that the children from the projects made crowd control quite difficult. Likewise, in my eyes, those

The impression that to be black meant not having what white folks had stuck with me.

children seemed more rough, rash, and ready to fight than any of my friends did. Frankly, I was a little afraid of them. I attended weekly inner-city child evangelism meetings with mom. She could spin a tale that would capture any audience. Yet many times I watched her lovingly struggle with unruly children as she shared her stories of good news. I remember wondering, "What's wrong with these kids?"

Our "Fresh Air" (as the urban-rural exchange program was called) girl stayed with us for several weeks one summer. She took her first step on grass in our front yard! Dad and Mom didn't even tell me what color this newcomer would be. She was rather big and bossy, from my point of view. I was not conscious of her brownness being a barrier to our friendship, but it did take me a while to get accustomed to her brash ingratitude. She struck me as eating too fast, always wanted more, and never saying "thank you."

Upon my inquiry, Mom explained in whispered tones that apparently no one was around or cared enough to teach her any manners. She added that many children like her had to fight to get what they could when they could because there might not be anything on their tables the next day.

I can't say I bemoaned her leaving, but the impression that to be black meant not having what white folks had stuck with me. The relief I felt upon her return to New York was accompanied by a sigh of pity.

Only in my later years have I realized that pity has clouded my perception of African-American. I have wondered how much it sparked sincere acts of compassion that paradoxically became the fecund soil for seeds of racism. Was pity a significant motivating factor in the early 1970s when I picked up my junior high students from the projects and took them to my house or to the beach?

During my years as a pastor, what was the mix of pity and compassion that drove me to the park to play basketball with the kids from "the other side" of town? Why did I spend five years trying to jump-start a community youth center? Is there some complicity in my present position as a white professor at a black college?

The concept of white privilege—that whiteness includes inherent unearned powers and privileges in North American culture—is a recent addition to the race discussion. In that light, I was blind to the ramifications and sins of privilege. Yet I have always felt a strong desire to help those who had less than I. That urge is thankfully rooted in the benevolence of my parents as well as a personal desire to conform to God's preference for the poor, the last, and the least.

The problem was that I unconsciously approached such persons as the poor who had nothing to offer the rich; the last who depended on the first; and the least who were mere

benefactors of the best. I transgressed the innate dignity of human being, ingenuity, and ability that the Creator endowed upon every creature. I could

do things for them, but I did not expect to establish a healthy give-and-take relationship with them.

My empathetic (or was it sympathetic?) acts of kindness shrouded a demeaning internalization of the belief that black people were needy people. Even as they could not be trusted to come up with a worthy religion in Africa, neither could they presently cope with societal responsibilities in this part of America. Basically, black people needed the white man's help. They provided a means to appease the guilt of the privileged.

This being said, I do not fault the Christian compassion of my parents for the racial prejudices I have held. They were merely living out healthy expressions of their faith within the confines of a sick system—a system of white supremacy that at times could color any act of charity. A system that consciously or subconsciously sacralized white privilege and internalized racism. A system that diminished the opportunities for African-Americans to share a reciprocal relationship with their white neighbors and then held them solely accountable for their lack.

Throughout their lives, my parents responded to genuine need without regard to the color of the outstretched hand. They pursued the righteousness (right relationship) and justice that the prophet Amos

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demanded. The racism I learned was a reflection of a society living amid broken relationships.

My parents' attempts to mend the breaks heightened my sensitivities to the divisions between white and black. I felt the tension of those differences. Dad and Mom were white and privileged, so even their efforts to fulfill the mission God had for them left space for subtle bits of racism to stain my soul. I misinterpreted truth. How much more racist would I be if they had not pursued God's call?

I genuinely applaud their efforts to reach out. My parents took risks to be rightly related with others. Through their acts of charity, I experienced connections with African-Americans that I could not have found outside of their obedience to God.

Admittedly, the initial contacts were made from the standpoint of the privileged helping those who knew the poverty of soul and pocketbook. The helpers were white, and those needing the help were black. Certain aspects of classism and racism could

hardly be avoided. Good deeds planted some bad seeds.

However, God used those experiences to help establish a level of comfort in relating to African-Americans that has led me to a place of greater understanding and wholeness. It is a place of confession and repentance; a place where reciprocity trumps racism; a place where relational give and take is expected and accepted. So far, for this compassionate racist, it feels like a better place to be.

—*Mel Leaman, West Grove, Pennsylvania, is Assistant Professor of Religion, Lincoln University. Leaman was raised in a Mennonite home, then following college and a few years of teaching, he was Christian Education and Youth Director at Asbury United Methodist Church, Maitland, Florida, and joined the UMC. A minister in Ohio and Pennsylvania from 1981 to 1999, he received a D.Min. in marriage and family from Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1990. He can be reached at jmleaman3@juno.com.*



Respecting a Racist

Benson Prigg

Dr. Mel Leaman and I are colleagues at Lincoln University, the oldest historically black college/university. A few years ago, he presented an idea about the impact of racism on teaching students. As we interacted that day and since, we realized that both those infected and affected by racism may teach unknowingly with racist notions.

In his Spring 2006 *DreamSeeker Magazine* comments, Mel, who invited me to respond to his article, shares early life experience of his parents as Mennonite missionaries that in retrospect points to the subtlety of racism. I have chosen to respond by focusing on an early experience of subtle racism with a kind Mennonite “missionary.”

The essence of my childhood has infiltrated my adolescent and adulthood stages of life. The essence consists of my religious upbringing. My initial religious experience stemmed from the missionary efforts of Mennonites. The good missionaries provided needed support for and to my family. They were good people with a good heart but unknowingly conditioned by American racism.

Theirs was a conditioning that seemingly prevented me from dating one of their daughters and seemingly prevented me from embracing African-

American cultural behaviors. It was a conditioning that prevented me from seeing that good people can be tainted by a diseased environment and an unquestioning upbringing.

They were missionaries but not gods. I recall an incident involving two white farmers that helped me to see that good people can be tainted by racism.

Running, ducking, diving, not to mention the squashing sounds of a tall, young, angry, blonde son of a dairy farmer trying to get me generated a giant image in my mind. I knew he needed me to work at the farm that day; there was whitewashing of walls, stacking of hay bales, cleaning of bull pens, and milking of cows to be done.

However, I had received a better job offer. If I told this son of the dairy farmer that I quit, he would be furious, and I would be forced to overwork. I had no time for his rage; I just wanted to be rid of him. Yet he was a few years older and few inches taller than I, which made facing him intimidating.

Feeling like a defeated biblical David, I hid in the basement, where I could hear but did not want to see my assailant wanting me to work on his farm. I had another farm to go to. He, they, would be mad, I was certain—but I had had enough. Somewhere deep in the basement, I could not release the boulder of heaviness until my hunter left my family's homestead of less than an acre.

I had worked on the dairy farm since about age 10. It gave me a place to escape from my little tiny home shared by nine other siblings and two

parents. We lived in a two-bedroom house with a non-functioning bathroom, a functioning outhouse, hot water due to a small two-burner kerosene stove, and lots of land. It was not ours.

Thoughts of going elsewhere besides school and church sometimes served as the only means to get away from this hut situated in a vast space. Working on the farm of a white family living on a road named after the family was the only other means of escape from a degree of poverty. Their son who was pursuing me was the youngest of the sons but much older than I was. He could be a bully. He could be a bully with his height. He could be a bully with the color of his skin. And when we fought at the intersection of his “family’s” road and another road, I was physically conquered, if not mentally.

Not all white, tall people were bullies. I worked for another farmer, a poultry farmer. He was a kind, older gentleman whose character was consistent, as was evident in the long relationship he and his family had with my parents and siblings. He was my pastor who became my employer. A Mennonite who had compassion, he tried me out as a worker. He knew I was working for another farmer but also knew I had to make a decision, because I couldn't just work a few hours for him.

The decision between two white employers—and whether to be a worker or an overworked worker—had to be made. I liked the sound of a Christian boss, one who had shown

benevolence toward my family more than once.

I confess that I saw obvious racism in the first employer, but it took me much longer to see and work through the subtle racism of my second employer. I am glad that people are more than their social disease and that some, such as my pastor turned out to be, are better able than others to be healed of it.

Racism is a social disease that infects one people but affects all people. Some white people, European Americans, resent and reject being seen as infected by racism; however, this is one of the symptoms for most racists. Being called a racist elicits the same reaction from whites as is experienced by non-whites when called heathens. The problem is that one is true while the other may be very false. And that some can't see their condition as well as others can.

The nature of this social disease as well as the varying abilities to confront it in oneself are evident in two anecdotes. The one is from Kalamazoo College. The other is the account of how I finally became aware of and worked through my pastor/employer's racism.

My students at Kalamazoo College, an historically private white college, were the cream of the crop in their academics but, like many of my colleagues, they were blind to how racism had infected them.

Being called a racist elic- its the same reaction from whites as is experi- enced by non-whites when called heathens.

They were soon awakened to it as they sat in either my American Literature course or my U.S. Ethnic Literature course. One was required of English majors while the latter was an elective many chose to enroll in. These students did not necessarily choose me for American Literature. This became obvious with the student evaluations of the teacher.

While in class, it appeared that all was going well between teacher and students. Opportunities to think, write, read, imagine, and express were made available throughout the quarter. I knew that their African-American professor's high expectations were surprising to the students; after all, what could such a professor require? They smiled in my face, so I accepted that all was well.

I set up the course in thirds, one-third dealing with Realism/Naturalism, one-third dealing with Harlem Renaissance, and one-third dealing with Modernism. The criticism of the course focused on the Harlem Renaissance (HR): too much time spent on certain authors—the HR authors were listed. Dislikes of the course and the professor through opposition to HR were recorded.

What a painful awakening to disillusion! I guess these young white students felt it was their prerogative both not to study African-American-related literature and to keep this African-American professor in his place. Those I wanted to help rejected my help.

I do not fault the students directly, because they are by-products of a racist society. I just wish that some of their elders had revealed their covert racism, which was obvious to those of us often affected by their infection.

As I recalled the subtle ways of racism, I went back to my experience of working on the poultry farm for my pastor. He earned my respect by the impact his human acts of kindness had on my struggling parents, who had 10 children couped up in one small livable shack. We were like chicks in a hen house. The pastor opened up the avenues of my spirit by the way he consistently related to my family in good times—and in bad times, as when my father had a 50/50 chance of surviving a blood clot in his brain, when my family had just a few weeks because of an eviction notice, when my family needed a home but had no collateral. This pastor and his family were there to see my family through.

He earned my respect when he seemingly took me under his wings after my older brother did not work out as one of his employees. What was he expecting from my brother, a young, black male who had issues within himself, his family, and the world? What was he expecting when he hired this habitual liar and thief? I guess he believed in reforming what others would view as lowlife.

He earned my respect when he took me into his business. While working at the farm, I learned plenty about chickens. Working with chickens minimized my having a lot of time

on my hands. It kept me away from my neighborhood friends who seemed not to be involved in anything constructive. It provided me a time to distance myself from ethnic peers. Chickens make a lot of noise, but they can't lead a person into trouble. Working on the farm provided an escape where I could think and work and make some money, more than I did working on that neighboring dairy farm.

I respected this Mennonite pastor and farmer. He helped me to see the world of business and how to be Christian about it. I respected his trust in me whenever he left me in charge while he and other family members were off on some other excursion. He trusted me with the chickens, with the eggs, with the customers, and with the money. He trusted me working with his daughter. He trusted me!

I don't know if he respected me. After I had given him years of loyal service, he hired a church friend my age. The friend was a Mennonite in that "real" Swiss-German ethnic way. He was born a farmer, a dairy farmer. I realized his years of experience with cows, but he had no experience with chickens. Yet he was given more responsibility. It seemed he was recognized as superior. I came to realize when looking at the payment books that he was getting paid more than I.

I began to question my pastor/employer's trust in me and my respect for him. My last full year of working on the farm, I wondered for months how to approach my pastor/employer for a well-earned

raise. For months I thought about his kindness, his consistent support of my family, his willingness to take me as though I was one of his own. Yet I was not getting paid what I was worth.

Eventually I approached him about the raise. His response was interesting. He said that he had already planned to give me a raise but as one lump sum, so I would have it when I went off to Rosedale Bible Institute.

While this was a sure way of having money toward school, I never understood why he couldn't just tell me this up front. I figured, he was caught and he had to come up with something. He didn't trust me to tell me this plan. Or did he realize he had never thought about it, and my bringing it to his attention made him guilty? I didn't bring up the issue of my church buddy getting paid more than I did.

I didn't bring it up until nearly 12 years later, after I got married. While I respected my pastor/employer, I told my wife of the one bothersome thing about him. His blind racism.

After sharing with my wife this burden, I went to his home. As we interacted, I told him of the thing that

remained a constant heartache when I thought of him. It was painful for me to see the sorrow and tears that came from this strong man who had never viewed things from my perspective.

It was painful for me to see the sorrow and tears that came from this strong man who had never viewed things from my perspective. He had never realized an action so seemingly small could be interpreted as racist.

He had never realized an action so seemingly small could be interpreted as racist. He owned his actions and asked for forgiveness.

Now I was in a position of authority which I relinquished as quickly as I received it by granting him forgiveness. My respect and trust in him were renewed that day in his living room.

She and I
Two people of
similar lineage
She with strings tied
Under her chin
I with three earrings
for two ears.

—Joyce Peachey 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.

Taking Root

Deborah Good

One thing at a time. I will do only one thing at a time.

A friend of mine decides this is the principle that will ease her stress level. I try to imagine her applying it to her life—sitting and playing with her one-year-old instead of nudging a ball with her toe while opening the mail and throwing together some supper; or waiting for the trolley and doing just that, instead of pulling out her electronic calendar (which handily doubles as a cell phone) to schedule a meeting.

Someone recently told me that a hormone released in nursing mothers actually improves their ability to multitask, and I believe it. I have seen more than one woman trying endlessly to use her time well, down to the last drop.

I have been confused recently about time and how I spend mine. It has been nearly a year and a half since I had a “conventional” nine-to-five. Instead, I have had more part-time, temporary, and odd jobs than I care to list here, while attempting to be what some would call “a writer.” And as a result, for nearly a year and a half, I have been in charge of my own time more than most people I know.

You have probably heard the story: James Frey wrote the book *A Million Little Pieces* and called it a

memoir. A watchdog website revealed (and Frey himself eventually admitted) that much of his memoir was actually fabricated—that maybe it should, in fact, be considered fiction. Several lawsuits surfaced, including one in which Seattle readers are taking Frey to court—for their “wasted time.”

Their *wasted time*? The charge first amuses and then exasperates me. If I could sue everyone who has “wasted” my time throughout my life, I’d be one wealthy woman. Yet I know it is true: We think time is a commodity. We have it or don’t have it, use it, spend it, and waste it. (Now insert “money” into the same sentence and find that it functions just as well.)

Our minutes, hours, and days are worth more or less depending on who we are and how we spend them. As I write this, I am amid negotiating an insurance claim related to a December car accident. How much time have I spent in doctor’s appointments? They want to know. And how much is each hour worth to me?

My dad died last July at 61, after a short and unexpected fight with cancer. People have told me that grief comes in waves, and I am finding this to be true. It rolls in without advance warning, and crashes on my inner shores. It comes as anger. It comes as sadness. It always, always comes as exhaustion.

And, oh, God, what shall I do with my grief?

I was invited to write and then

read a “lament” for a Sunday morning service on the Psalms.

*What shall I do with that deep ongoing ache?
Shall I weed it out of the messy garden of
my life—
cut off its heavy buds
and toss them in a heap?*

This is the question, isn’t it? I could fill my time with work and meetings and parties. I could push myself through, *weed it out . . . cut off its heavy buds and toss them in a heap*. Some have told me that they survived the terrible waves of sadness by keeping busy.

*Or shall I nurture it, let it blossom,
and then sit for hours, breathing in its
petals,
tears a river down my face?*

I decided recently that one of my part-time jobs was wearing me out, that my time was too full and my energy too depleted. I needed to pay attention to my sadness, to *nurture it, let it blossom*. I resigned.

Not having a well-defined job has me asking again a question I inherited, like skin, from my Mennonite family line: What am I contributing to the world?

Yesterday I spent most of my time at the Philadelphia city court building for jury duty. Probably 200 of us waited together with little to do or say; the room was practically silent. I made an attempt at conversation with the young man sitting beside me.

“Have you done this before?” I asked. We talked briefly about jury duty, and about the weekend’s snow storm. He didn’t seem interested in more, so I amused myself instead with my curiosity about him, imagining who he was and what made up his story.

I noticed the large black letters he had printed under “occupation” on the jury selection form: “bakery worker.” What kind of bakery did he work for? I wondered. Did he bake? Deliver? Run the register? Mostly, I wanted to know if this was his real work, or just what he did to make money. What was his life really about? Perhaps this is forefront in the minds of all of us fishing for an occupation.

Sometimes I find it helpful to think of the world as a huge power grid with currents of energy moving this way and that, making things happen: lights go on, coffee gets made, newspapers get printed, people and places everywhere influence and transform one another. *If the world is a power grid, I think to myself, then I am a cord wishing I could plug in.*

Work is happening everywhere around us. In Philadelphia, where I live, the hard work of change is always bubbling beneath the surface. She speaks through poetry, hip-hop, and the murals and gardens that reclaim broken neighborhoods for beauty. She is happening through door-to-door organizing and meetings in church basements; through websites, email listservs, and nonprofit organizations.

I unconsciously believe, as many do, that the best response to our city's voluminous pain and our global nightmares is to do, do, do.

Today, Latino immigrants and others filled the plaza across from the Liberty Bell, opposing a senseless bill in Congress and calling for immigration reform. I joined them for an hour, mostly a witness to one current of the world’s people-power, mostly feeling like a cord, wanting to plug in.

As I sat with the other jurors yesterday, I read in *The Sun* magazine about one writer’s experience of a small-town flood: “We were so busy being flooded,” writes Sparrow, “we didn’t hear that the pope had died.”

I have felt that way more than once this year. Some days recently, I glance at the front page of the newspaper, only to set it back down with a sigh. It’s as though the part of me that cares has spent so much of itself this year, I have only a little left. It’s as though what is going on in my own head is enough.

I unconsciously believe, as many do, that the best response to our city’s voluminous pain and our global nightmares is to *do, do, do*. Contribute to the world. Plug in. Follow the news, analyze, organize, act. But grief is teaching me another way.

One thing at a time. I will do only one thing at a time.

I was thinking about all of this as I took a shower one morning last week. The radio was on and a woman, Mary Cook, was reading a three-minute essay, part of a National Public Radio series called “This I Believe.” I stepped from the shower and stood

there, dripping in my towel, as I realized what Cook's essay was about. Her fiancé had died suddenly several years ago. She felt mortified and guilty for being so immobilized by her loss. She worried that others would think her lazy.

"One very wise man once told me," I heard her say, "You are not doing nothing. Being fully open to your grief may be the hardest work you ever do."

I had just resigned from my job. I ran from the bathroom to write down her words.

Later, I have coffee with a woman from church, and she tells me about paper-white bulbs, how they look scrawny and unimpressive—ugly ducklings of sorts—when she first plants them in a vase of rocks and water. They appear to do nothing for weeks, but all the while are quietly sending down their roots. Suddenly they shoot upward into beautiful

white blooms. Somehow the image is almost enough to make me cry. *Of course*, I write in my journal that night, *I am a bulb!*

Wasted time? Perhaps we need our wasted time—seasons to let our fields sit fallow, allowing the soil of our lives to recuperate.

Sometimes blossoming is only possible after weeks of root-growing. *Wasted* time? Perhaps we need our wasted time—seasons to let our fields sit fallow, allowing the soil of our lives to recuperate.

In these days of doing less, in these days of grief, I just might be taking root, building resources of energy that will later send up green stems, shoots, and tender, beautiful blossoms.

—Deborah Good, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, is working on family writing projects based on interviews with her father and grandparents and is open to suggestions for what she should be when she grows up. She can be reached at deborahagood@gmail.com.



Chocolate and Easter

Carole Boshart

Anyone who has engaged me in serious conversation (or not so serious) may come to know that one of my favorite things is chocolate, and that my favorite church season is Lent and Easter. Now chocolate and Lent/Easter might seem like two natural combinations. And they are, but I suggest a different way of looking at chocolate during this Easter. So imagine with me a unique and subtle aroma of sweetness, tastes of bitterness and darkness, of lightness and airiness, and textures that stir the senses; yes, Lent and Easter is all of these things. (And you thought I was talking about chocolate!)

In the garden of Gethsemane Jesus wrestled with God's will and himself. There are various interpretations of what that time of prayer was like for Jesus. We do know it was dark and difficult. Through prayer Jesus asked for assurance from his Holy Father that this was what he should do. In this there was both bitterness and sweetness—the bitterness of death and the sweetness of redemption.

Have you ever had chocolate truffles? They are dark, a bit bitter but also sweet. Not everyone likes them, and for some (like me) it has been an acquired

taste. Truffles are like mushrooms, growing in the ground, in moist dark places, thriving on the death of the vegetation around them. I hold these two together, the despair of Jesus giving himself up to death for us, and the bitter-velvety taste of chocolate truffles that come from dark places.

Jesus being brought before the High Priest and Pilate had bitterness to it also. There was no sweetness there, just the bitterness of Jesus coming before them without pretense or defense. The gospels have him saying very little, like a lamb being brought to slaughter. Just as we have no defense for our sinfulness, so did Jesus offer no defense.

Have you ever tasted bitter chocolate? It is just the processed cocoa bean with no sweetener added. It is the starting point for most processed chocolate. I have tasted unsweetened chocolate. It was a jolt to my sense of taste, expecting one thing but tasting quite another. Perhaps that is how the disciples felt when Jesus was arrested and put on trial, especially Judas and Peter. It was not supposed to be like that; Jesus was supposed to triumph! I hold these two together, the surprise and unpreparedness of Jesus being brought to trial and the unrefined, surprising taste of unsweetened/bitter chocolate.

Thinking about Jesus carrying his cross to Golgotha transports me to that biblical time, and I can imagine the stony path to that hilltop, a stone being used to pound in the nails, and

stones being used to anchor the cross. Stones and nails, hard things that bite into flesh.

Have you ever had nuts in chocolate, or chocolate-covered nuts? There are so many different kinds of nuts that can be covered: peanuts, pecan, almonds, cashews, hazelnuts, wal-

nuts, macadamia.... The list can go on and on. But each one is the same in that there is that bit of chocolate-sweetness before you come to the center, the crunch, the bite.

So it is with Christ walking to the cross; encased in that act of love is his task, impossible except for the Divine, of dying for our sins. I hold these two together, the stony path to the cross and the sweet crunch of chocolate-covered nuts.

On Easter morning, the women who followed Jesus went to his tomb to anoint him and more properly prepare him for burial. They brought with them spices and fragrances and perhaps fresh clothes to wrap him in. But when they arrived, the tomb was empty, a hollow space.

Have you ever had hollow chocolate? Often at Easter time it is decorated with colors and adornments made of colored chocolate or other kinds of sugary confection. But when you break it open, nothing is there; it is empty, hollow.

I have spent untold hours for many Easters breaking apart hollow chocolate; it does not matter what shape it is or what animal it repre-

sents; if it is hollow I will eat it. In the past few years chocolate makers have made hollow chocolate with other candies inside, like a surprise. This is even better! Hollow chocolate, with something in the nothingness. I hold these two together, hollow chocolate with a wonderful surprise in its emptiness and the risen Lord leaving a message of hope in the empty tomb.

Chocolate and Easter. I find redemption, transformation, and hope for the future in both. I hope for all our Easters to contain the sweetness, the bitter and dark, the light and airy, and textures that stir the senses and

invite further communion with our risen Lord.

—Carole Boshart, Eugene, Oregon, was born and raised in southern Ontario, Canada. She has studied at Goshen (Ind.) College and at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, where she earned a Masters in Christian Formation. She has been writing columns such as these for the past six years and is currently an online columnist for the Third Way Café, www.ThirdWayCafe.com. She and her husband Tim live in Eugene with their three children.



Pockets of Death and Elephants

Noël R. King

"It's no good," the doctor sighed, sitting back on his stool. "That's a good-sized pocket of death we found in there."

"But...but....DEATH?" spluttered the patient. "What kind of death? Cancer? AIDS? Some weird tropical disease?"

"Nope," said the doctor. "Death, just death."

"That impossible! You must be joking! What kind of doctor are you, anyway? People have to die of *something*. What is it, Doctor? WHAT IS IT??"

"Well, that's just it," said the doctor. "Everybody thinks you have to die of something. In your case, it's nothing. You are dying of nothing."

"Can't we *do* something? I mean, you can't just send me home like this! Help me, Doctor! Help me!"

"Well, sure, we can do all kinds of things, but nothing will help you, I am afraid. Death is death."

Good heavens, thought the elephant as it watched the little man walking toward it with a pitchforkful of hay in his little hands. *What am I doing here? Is this really a life? Am I even alive?*

Depressed, the elephant munched, shivered away

some flies, munched some more. *At least this hay is real*, it thought. *It stinks.*

"That's right," the little man was saying now to another little man who was cleaning out the stall behind the elephant. "I've got a pocket of death in me, he says. Told me so this morning."

"I coulda told you that for free," said the other little man.

Oh, oh, oh, the elephant moaned to itself. *How did I get here? Why can't I just go home? Where is my mama?*

Home, home on the range, where the deer and the buffalo roam . . . where seldom is heard a discouraging word, and the skies are not cloudy all day.

"Saw another pocketa death in the office today," the first man said to the second. "Kinda shook me up, you wanna know the truth."

"No sense crying over it," said his buddy. "Death is death, you know. You're a doctor!"

"Yeah," said the first guy. "That's what I told him. I sat back on my stool and said, 'Death is death, you know,' and then he wanted to know what the

heck kind of doctor I was. I'm just a death doctor, I shoulda told him."

"Oh my," said the first guy. "Is that an elephant I see over there?"

"Well I'll be—," said the second guy. "Where are we?"

"I think we are in a very strange dream," said the first guy, "and I don't like it one bit."

The elephant looked at them and saw they had no hay. *I must be dreaming*, it said to itself. *Where's my big old fence? Where's that smelly old hay? Where's my mama when I need her?*

Oh, the places you'll go! she told me.

But where, mama? Where will I go?

Wherever you go, that's where you'll be, she said.

I'm here, mama, I'm here!
And so you are, my child. And so you are.
Welcome home.

—As circumstances warrant, through her Turquoise Pen column Noël R. King, South Riding, Virginia, reports on strange and wonderful things, including pockets of death and elephants.



A Case for Family Care

Mark R. Wenger

I first heard the idea about 30 years ago. Too clever by half, it sounded like the perfect way to protect the family estate and stick it to the government at the same time. Not talked about openly, the plan is still making the rounds in quiet family discussions and private offices of financial counselors and attorneys. Here it is: Persuade aging parents to transfer their financial assets to family members so they can qualify to receive Medicaid-funded nursing home care.

What a deal! Jesus of Nazareth once told a rich man to sell his assets, give the money to the poor and become a disciple (Mark 10:21). That was the way to put money in the bank of heaven, said Jesus. The man turned away with a sad look on his face. In an ironic twist, the advice given to some seniors today turns Jesus' words on their head: "Give what you own to your children; then let the government take care of you. That's how to protect the family nest egg!" Except the scheme is dishonest and selfish, becoming harder to do legally, and at the bottom stinks as a disgrace to the family.

After such an opening, perhaps I ought to locate myself. I am 50 years old with children in high school

and college. My parents are 88 and 84, living independently, although my brother and his wife just moved in next door. God knows what the future holds; we don't.

I have been a pastor for 18 years and participated in the struggles of persons with the predicaments and decisions of getting old. And for the last six years I have been on the board of directors of a faith-based retirement community with a wide continuum of services and a commitment to provide care for those with limited finances. Nursing home care eats up assets like an elephant.

Here is my conviction: Families still carry the primary moral obligation for the care and cost of aging parents and close relatives. Getting old and becoming dependent is an ancient human anxiety. With rare exception, the social contract in most cultures has assumed that children take care of aged parents just as parents once took care of the helpless children. Families, as a matter of honor and respect, care for their own aged.

This kind of social bargain remains the norm in most global cultures. Many examples can still be found even in American culture that prizes individualism and independence. The Amish will commonly build a house-beside-a-house so that three generations live under one multi-angled roof. A woman I know renovated the basement of her home into an apartment so that her mother could move from out of state to live

there. Another family made arrangements for someone to cook and clean for an aging parent. Churches have constructed retirement communities partly to help families with the sometimes overwhelming challenge of caring for senior relatives.

**But shame on
those who game
the system
merely to protect
family assets!**

But what happens when people live longer than their money lasts? Whose responsibility is it when someone in a nursing home or assisted living residence runs out of money? This is where things really get tangled, partly because there are so many variables, partly because it's become less clear where the moral obligation resides. There are no easy solutions.

I'm convinced that each level of community plays an important role: the individual, the family, the congregation, the retirement center, local and state social services, and national government. In a society in which traditional circles of community have weakened, government plays a more critical role as caretaker of last resort. For those without adequate personal or family resources, there is no indignity in tapping Medicaid. The isolated and vulnerable are worthy of society's guardianship. Don't get me started about the immoral budget priorities of the current national administration!

But shame on those who game the system merely to protect family assets! The case I'm making is for children and families not to sidestep their primary responsibility of caring for and even helping to cover end-of-life liv-

ing costs. Purchasing a long-term care insurance policy is one option. Another is for immediate family members to pool financial resources. Throwing Mom and Dad onto the tender mercies of the government in an artificial move to poverty is the antithesis of basic human decency and family honor.

I am appealing as well to congregations, which typically invest heavily in the nurture of children and youth—rightfully so—but proportionately offer much less toward the well-being of seniors who have sometimes been long-time members. Many congregations grant scholarship monies for young adults to attend high school or college. This aid is integral to the identity and mission of the body. What about expanding that vision to enable support for senior saints who lack the financial means for their own care?

Families and congregations need to join other layers of society in taking on their share rather than too easily passing the buck. There will always be the need for retirement communities to offer unreimbursed compassionate care—those with means to pay offsetting the cost of those without. There will always be the need for local, state, and national social assistance for the elderly and families who can't pay. But the first place of sharing is within smaller circles of family and faith communities.

Children and immediate family members with the means to help carry primary responsibility for aging parents who become dependent and low on money.

Would I feel differently if my parents were poor and needing long-term care? How would I feel if faced with the choice of helping to pay for their care or sending my daughters to college? For me, this is currently a hypothetical question; I know it isn't for others. It would be tough to choose. None of us wants to face such a choice or for our children to face it on our behalf.

Many of us live within a contradiction: financial independence and a sense of entitlement. We cherish privacy and self-sufficiency, but if tragedy strikes or we goof up we expect the government to bail us out. Again government assistance can be crucial. When social networks break down or needs turn catastrophic, if the government does not care for the poor, oppressed—or elderly—too often no one does. But we need more. We need to revive smaller circles of community burden-sharing, especially in the care of the elderly.

The issues are much more complex than I've sketched in this short column. But sometimes complexity becomes an exit for ducking the obvious: Children and immediate family members with the means to help carry primary responsibility for aging parents who become dependent and low on money. Accepting such responsibility is the honorable thing to do. Likewise congregations share in this circle of community. This is the loving thing to do.

If some financial counselor suggests that Mom and Dad transfer all their assets to the children to qualify for Medicaid, take a deep breath, go home, get a Bible and read James 1:27. "Pure and lasting religion in the sight of God our father means that we must care for orphans and widows in

their troubles and refuse to let the world corrupt us."

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

Farmer Brown

Grandfather only flirted with senility on the days we rode to the stock auction singing the same verse of "I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles" so many times that even the sheep in the back were happy to die.

Weather was central.
Baseball was central.
The Russians were central.
The Bible was central.
Helping was central.
The other parts of life were alongside the trail,
chicken feathers and onion skin.

The most difficult thing he ever had to do besides die,
was put his dog to sleep.
He was ancient and familiar,
a cross between the smell of dried leaves
and the taste copper pennies leave in your mouth.

—Larry Moffitt is editor of the UPI Religion & Spirituality Forum. This poem, written on the Oklahoma farm where he grew up, is from his memoir, "Unroll your carpet and I will read your heart." His email is Lmoffitt@upi.com.

"Brokeback Mountain": A Parable of the Conversation

David Greiser

This review probably belongs in the Winter 2006 issue of *DreamSeeker Magazine* rather than the present one. There are two reasons why it could not be included in that special issue on homosexuality. First, the editor decided to forego regular *DreamSeeker* columns and devote the full magazine to essays on the topic. Second, even if I had wanted to weigh in as a film reviewer, the obvious film for analysis, "Brokeback Mountain," had not yet been released. By including a review in this issue, it is my hope that the conversation from the last issue will be continued.

By this time many readers will have seen or at least read a review of "the most talked-about movie of 2005." Hackneyed clichés aside, "Brokeback Mountain" is a film worth talking about, worth adding to the dialogue begun in the last *DreamSeeker*. It is a beautifully filmed, exquisitely acted, honestly rendered story about that old Hollywood standby—forbidden love.

The film is all the more powerful because Director

Ang Lee respects the arc of the story from beginning to end, rather than attempting to use this specific narrative to deliver a "message." This is primarily a story of one love affair and its effects on two families. It is only secondarily a film *about* homosexuality in general.

For those who have not seen it, "Brokeback Mountain" unfolds over a 20-year period, 1963 to 1983. It tells of two young ranch hands, Ennis Del Mar (played by Heath Ledger) and Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal) hired to tend sheep for the summer on Brokeback Mountain in Wyoming. Ennis is a stoic, barely verbal Marlboro Man, while Jack is more expressive and spirited.

Whiskey and boredom eventually conspire to get the two men talking and, in time, to experience an attraction to each other that is consummated in an awkward, fumbling, romantic encounter that is equal parts passion and pugilism. The following morning the two are barely able to acknowledge what has happened. Ennis mumbles, "This thing we got goin' is a one-shot deal. You know I ain't queer." Jack concurs, "Me neither."

The summer ends, the two men part ways, and before long both have married and begun traditional families. Yet their affair continues as a periodic series of trysts masked as "fishing trips" during which, oddly, no fish are ever caught.

Jack holds out the hope that eventually he and Ennis can be together. Ennis demurs, recounting a stark

memory of his father dragging him off to view the disfigured corpse of a mutilated and murdered man who had been suspected of being "queer."

"It cain't ever be like that," Ennis says of Jack's desire for them to be together. "This thing gets a hold of us in the wrong time . . . in the wrong place . . . and we're dead."

Australian Heath Ledger's performance as Ennis is an artistic highlight of "Brokeback." His Ennis is verbally clumsy and emotionally clamped down; yet the viewer feels the inner frustration that regularly boils over into violent anger.

In time the two men's lives fall into lonely patterns. Ennis's wife divorces him after gradually surmising that her husband is gay. Jack continues his marriage of convenience, seeking emotional solace in short-term affairs and in furtive trips to Mexico for anonymous gay sex.

The emotional fallout of Jack and Ennis's relationship on their families is explored sufficiently to add depth and truth to the story. Each man finds himself increasingly isolated, his world fragmented into a series of disconnected, unsatisfying relationships as he pines for his one true love. Ultimately each man can allow himself to be fully known only by the other; the cost of becoming vulnerable with anyone else is just too great.

I went to the theater twice to see "Brokeback Mountain." After the

Ultimately each man can allow himself to be fully known only by the other; the cost of becoming vulnerable with anyone else is just too great.

second viewing I found myself thinking about the film in light of Mennonite denominational conversations on homosexuality. It struck me that "Brokeback Mountain" serves as a kind of sobering metaphor for our failed conversations as a church. Just as Ennis and Jack are simultaneously drawn to and repulsed by each other, so various parts of our church have experienced attraction and repulsion in attempting to discern a common standpoint on this matter.

Just as Ennis and Jack can't bring themselves to name their attraction, much less to explore its emotional dimensions, so too our church is only able to discuss this most personal of subjects through a filter of theological abstraction. To name our deepest

longings, doubts, questions, hopes, and fears seems to entail too much risk. Despite endless discussions we have failed to communicate. Having failed to communicate, we now dwell in an uneasy coexistence in which even the prospect of another discussion prompts psychological nausea.

Though I hope for the day when we can all be together, my great fear is that the story of "Brokeback Mountain" will remain a metaphor, rather than a tool of learning, for the church.

—*Dave Greiser, Souderton, Pennsylvania, serves as teaching pastor at Souderton Mennonite Church and adjunct professor of preaching at Palmer Theological Seminary in Philadelphia.*

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The Pen, Mighty or Not

A Review of Justice and Only Justice and Bethlehem Besieged

Daniel Hertzler

Naim Stifan Ateek. *Justice and Only Justice*. Orbis Books, 1989.

Mitri Raheb. *Bethlehem Besieged*. Fortress Press, 2004.

The conflict in the Middle East drags on. For more than 50 years Israelis have been oppressing Palestinians and Palestinians have been responding violently. The recent majority vote received by the radical Hamas party with typical negative responses by Israel and the United States prolongs the standoff.

In light of these developments, it may seem redundant to review Naim Ateek's *Justice and Only Justice* more than 15 years after it first appeared. But like the Old Testament prophets who got into the canon and are read and pondered whether or not anyone follows them, Ateek has made a statement. As a representative of the Christian Palestinians, a small minority among the Palestinians, Ateek has studied the Bible and drawn from the thinking of liberation theology, first developed in Latin America.



He begins the book with his own experience, telling how his middle class family living in the Palestinian town of Beisan was evicted after the Israeli occupation of the town on May 12, 1948. His father pleaded with the military governor to let his family of 17 stay in their home. "But the blunt answer came, 'If you do not leave, we will have to kill you'" (9).

So the family moved to Nazareth, where Naim grew up in the Episcopal church. Eleven years later, in 1959, he left for the U.S., where he entered university. He eventually wrote a dissertation in Berkeley, California, and this serves as background for his book.

In chapter 2 he reviews the history and reality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, tracing it back to Zionism in the nineteenth century. He reports the contradictory promises the British made to Jews and to Arabs in connection with the expected breakup of the Ottoman Empire:

During the war years (1914-1918) Britain entered into three separate agreements that contradicted one another. Besides the McMahon-Hussein agreement with the Arabs and the Balfour Declaration addressing the Jews, on May 16, 1916, Britain reached a secret understanding with France and Russia . . . stipulating that the Ottoman Empire was to be divided among the three countries. (28)

He describes the Palestinian disaster of the 1940s as an outgrowth of these conflicting British policies.

Ateek writes with the knowledge of the first Intifada which erupted in Gaza and on the West Bank in December, 1987. As an Israeli citizen, he has had a different experience from persons in the occupied territories. Although oppressed, he still has the advantages of Israeli citizenship and as such has developed a theology which he proposes for Christian Palestinians.

But first he reviews the history of Christianity in the Middle East. "After Constantine the church was caught in some bitter controversies that eventually left it weak and fragmented" (50). That fragmentation continues today. However, he observes that the church has "fared better than the Muslims because of its organization around bishops and clergy, whether indigenous or expatriate" (55).

His own Episcopal church, with a membership of "a little over one thousand" (55), has more influence than one might expect from so small a group. His ability to study in the U.S. and return to publish a book is an example. He concludes that "To pursue peace with justice is the church's highest calling in Israel-Palestine today, as well as its greatest challenge" (73).

So Ateek goes into the Bible as a basis for a Palestinian perspective on liberation. But right away there is a prob-

lem. As I myself once heard from a Christian Palestinian, some do not find the Hebrew Bible reassuring. Ateek observes that numbers of Jews and Christians have read the Old Testament "as a Zionist text to such an extent that it has become almost repugnant to Palestinian Christians" (77).

He concludes that they need to begin with Jesus, interpret the God in the old Testament through Jesus and move on from there. He proposes that "A Palestinian theology of liberation stands in the authentic biblical tradition and affirms the inclusive character and nature of God" (100).

He bases this theology on two points. The first is that all land belongs to God: "The land that God has chosen at one particular time in history for one particular people is now perceived as a paradigm, a model for God's concern for every people and every land" (108).

The second point is that as biblical Israel matured, it learned God is not confined to one strip of land but is universal. "Theologically speaking, what is at stake today in the political conflict over the land of the West Bank and Gaza is nothing less than the way we understand God" (111).

He observes also that "the great enigma is how can the Jewish people who experienced such suffering and dehumanization at the hands of the Nazis turn around and inflict so much suffering and dehumanization on others" (116). Indeed, many of us have wondered about this.

Ateek suggests that Palestinian Christians have a special contribution

to make to the Middle Eastern cultural and political dilemma. "Even now, when many Muslims and Jews are living in the spirit of militant triumphalism, the church continues to live in the shadow of the cross. . . . For the church to follow in the footsteps of Lord Jesus Christ, it must walk the way of the cross" (116).

So he proposes his own major premise and solutions. This is that "Palestine is a country for both the Jews and the Palestinians. There is no other viable, just option that can be adopted." His preference would be "one united and democratic state for all Palestinians and Jews" and he finds it of interest that the U.S., that champion of democracy, has not supported this (165).

The trouble, of course, as he observes, is that in such an open society, Jews would eventually become a minority. So he concludes that the only present solution is to allow the Palestinians to have their own state alongside Israel. "It is for the security and well-being of Israel that a Palestinian state should be established" (167).

For this he proposes that the Palestinians need to recognize the Holocaust, and Jews should acknowledge having wronged the Palestinians by the way they grabbed their land. And, he says, Jerusalem needs to be shared.

This proposal separates itself from the Muslim assumption that the state of Israel is a colonial incursion that will eventually go away as well as the Jewish vision of expelling all Palestinians so they can have the whole land to themselves. In the end he proclaims, "The challenge of Palestinian Chris-

tians, and indeed to all Palestinians and to all people in this conflict in Israel-Palestine is: do not destroy yourself with hate, maintain your inner freedom, insist on justice, work for it, and it shall be yours" (187).

This was a brave vision published in 1989, but life moves on. I've been curious to know what Ateek has been doing since then, when the second Intifada became violent and Israel responded in-kind. From the Internet, I find that he continues his efforts.

Among the things he has done has been to organize in 1994 the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center in Jerusalem, the base from which he now works. "Sabeel strives to develop a spirituality based on justice, peace, nonviolence, liberation, and reconciliation for the different national communities." His organization has been able to organize "Friends of Sabeel" in various other countries and to sponsor conferences highlighting its concerns. It also publishes a quarterly English language magazine called *Cornerstone*.

Among the things I found was a clear-cut statement against suicide bombings. This extensive document seeks to account for the development of the bombings and observes that "There were no suicide bombings before the Oslo Peace Process" and suggests that "It is the result of despair and hopelessness that started when an increasing number of Palestinians became frustrated by the Israeli oppression and humiliation."

Nevertheless, "Although some people in our Palestinian community

admire the sacrifice of the suicide bombers . . . and although we understand its deeper motivation and background, we condemn it from both our position of faith as well as a legitimate method for resisting the occupation."

Mitri Raheb's book is more narrowly focused. But like Naim Ateek, he has used his training and contacts outside of the country to enable his ministry. Raheb in Bethlehem lives within occupied territory, so his life has been even more constricted than Ateek's. Born in the early 1960s, Raheb has lived most of his life under Israeli occupation. Yet he received a scholarship to study in Germany and returned to serve his people in Bethlehem.

His story is a reminder of the extent to which an occupying power will go to harass the citizens: petty regulations which cause ongoing irritation and sometimes death. He tells how his father-in-law, a businessman, died because he was not allowed to get to Jerusalem in time for medical treatment. He had a business permit to cross the line but was repeatedly turned away because going to the hospital was not a business trip.

During the siege of Bethlehem by the Israelis, the Lutheran parsonage was invaded by Israeli soldiers. They were removed only after the Lutheran bishop in Jerusalem called Sweden, Sweden called the office of Ariel Sharon, and the soldiers were sent away.

As a theologian, Raheb reflects on the case of the mysterious sufferer in Isaiah 53. Jews have seen themselves

here, Christians have seen Jesus, and Raheb sees the plight of the Palestinians reflected in this text. He observes that there is plenty of guilt to go around. "We suffer because of our own sins, but also because of the sins of many others." His list includes the sins of the Europeans who persecuted and destroyed Jews, the sins of the Jews themselves, the sins of other Arabs, the sins of the Jewish lobby in America. "Then we have the Christian Right in the United States. I do not find much in them that is Christian or right" (88-90).

Despite these burdens Raheb insists that the Palestinians will press ahead. The latter third of the book describes efforts to cope with their restricted environment. Examples he reports include a candlelight march in December 2000, when 2,500 people defied an Israeli curfew. Also there is what he describes as a "Bright Stars" program in which children are "invited to gather in different art, music, sports, communication, and environmental clubs, according to their talents and gifts" (114).

In the end, Raheb is hopeful. He concludes that "Christian hope does

not surrender to the forces of death and despair but challenges them" (156). I heard it reported that 30,000 Christian pilgrims were expected in Bethlehem over the last Christmas season even though they would have to enter through a checkpoint in the Israeli wall. No doubt the local Christians find support and encouragement from this activity.

As a theologian, Raheb reflects on the case of the mysterious sufferer in Isaiah 53. Jews have seen themselves here, Christians have seen Jesus, and Raheb sees the plight of the Palestinians reflected in this text.

And not all the Jews are against them. Marc H. Ellis has written a book *Toward a Jewish Theology of Liberation* (Orbis, 1987) in which he states, "A Jewish theology of liberation is unequivocal in this regard: the Palestinian people have been deeply wronged in the creation of Israel and in the occupation of territory. As we celebrate our empowerment, we must repent of our transgressions and stop them immediately" (116).

The powers that be are not listening to him either. But these words have been written.

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



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among them.—Matthew 18:20**



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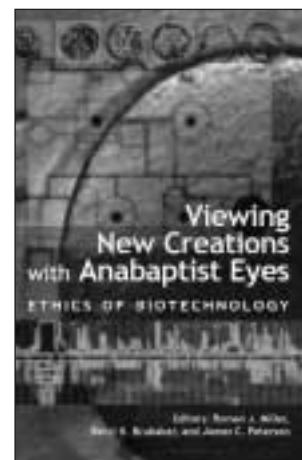
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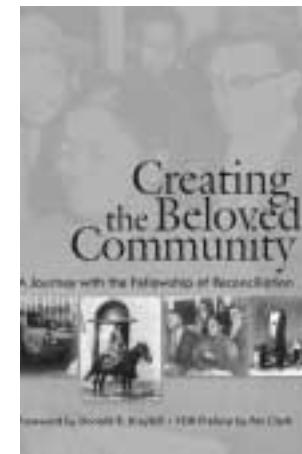
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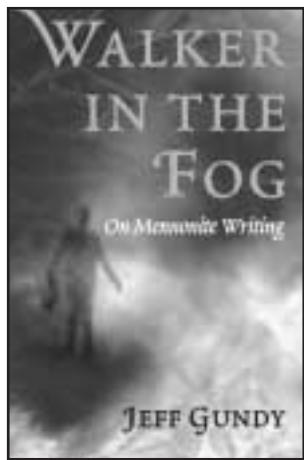


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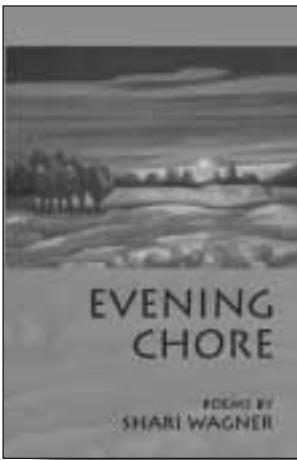
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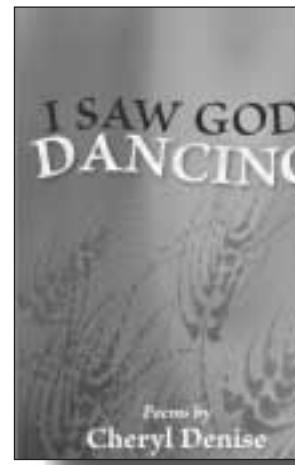
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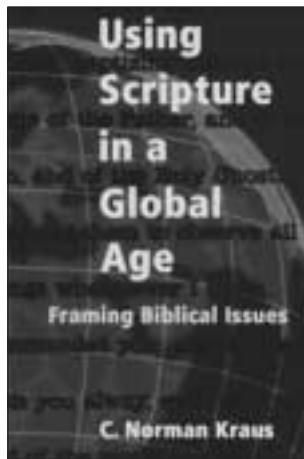


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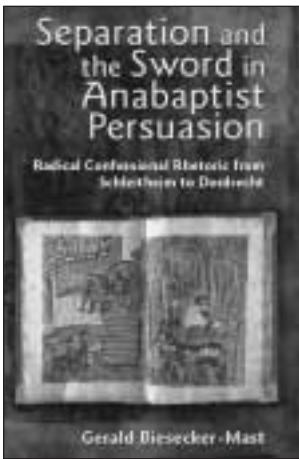


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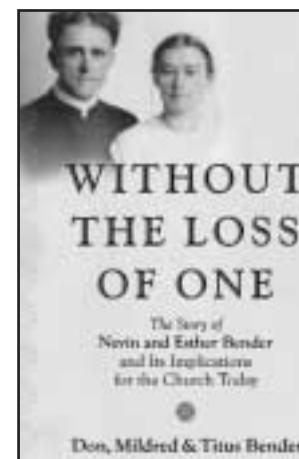


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On Earth

Outside my window
the apple tree resurcts herself—
leaves, light of April, her forgotten eyes
full of regret—but
how does one go about dying gracefully?
The world is filled with people
who have not died.

Once
I stood on a northern sharp corner,
moonlit mountains intersect
winter, blue clouds painted by desperate wolves
proving their existence
and desires by howling through darkness.
Here in my room, I question
existence before extinction.

Touch me, says Andris.

Touch me.

—A former art professor remarked that the sketchbooks of Clarissa Jakobsens, Aurora, Ohio, looked more like poetry than paintings, an observation that accurately predicted her midlife direction. Finally, years of teaching and parenting have led Clarissa back to poetry classes at Kent State University and reading at Shakespeare and Company, in Paris. A reader throughout northern Ohio and poetry editor of the Arsenic Lobster, she won first place in the Akron Art Museum 2005 New Word Competition. This summer she looks forward to kicking sandcastles with Gail Mazur and painting dunes with Bert Yarborough at the Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center.