

DreamSeeker Magazine

Voices from the Soul



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Mark R. Wenger

It's Just a Pineapple

Kathleen Zehr Nussbaum

Beneath the Skyline

Neither a Saint Nor a Celebrity

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The Turquoise Pen

My Trip on the Space Shuttle and What I Learned from It

Noël R. King

Water Into Wine

Elaine Greensmith Jordan

She Called Me "Sir"

Starla J. King

and much more

Spring 2009

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Editorial: As the World Quakes

Mark R. Wenger's column leads this issue because it confronts head-on the fact that we are living not in the soap opera of "As the World Turns" but the real-life drama of a world quaking. We don't know for how long. We don't know what will have tumbled when the ground stops shaking. But we do feel the tremors every day. In what strikes me as a stroke of brilliance, Wenger turns to a wise veteran of the Great Depression to bring together then and now and see what wisdoms we can pool.

Boring into the quaking, Kathy Zehr Nussbaum wonders if pineapples on mailboxes are quite the thing to worry about right now. Deborah Good tells of losing her father and offers pertinent glimpses of his wisdoms—such as the value of bringing people together to address and support each other through the tough times.

Noel R. King's column is placed where it is to keep us humble. As the world quakes, billions and trillions of dollars are being thrown around to try to rescue us. But none of us—no matter our pet solution—really knows if it will work or is a version of the shuttle stick accidentally nudged.

Then columns to follow maybe reground us a bit in the faith that life goes on. Renee Gehman hangs in with her own stresses to model and re-

port on the stamina required even to complete her column. Elaine Greensmith Jordan faces her own tremor—the loss of a husband—confronts opposition to her ministry, yet still stumbles into water turned wine.

We are living not in the soap opera of "As the World Turns" but the real-life drama of a world quaking.

Starla J. King simply—yet groundingly—reminds us to celebrate who we are even though we can't figure it all out. Reviewing "Doubt," David Greiser shows us that truth matters yet we can't always solidly plant ourselves on it.

Often we hear that what ended the Great Depression was getting into a great war. Daniel Hertzler's reviews remind us how tempted we are to expect salvation from the Myth of Redemptive Violence.

The final two articles remind us that as much as we rightly long for the tremors to ease, we are, in the end, only grass, forced to hope that what remains everlasting is the love of God. Still humans want God with skin on, so in my column I asked if "you'll hold me as I held you," and Joe Postove tells of an Anne Friedmann he loved to the end because she first loved his quaking family.

Finally the poets take us into the quakings and their sleepnesses and doubts as well as offer ongoing hints of hope that we shall still endure, still find home. —Michael A. King

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Insomnia

Why I am sitting in the living room
at 3:00 A.M.
eating graham crackers
in the dark.

Because insomnia is hard work,
and even though I think of people
lying awake in anguish
losing loved ones, health, job or home,
(terrible things coming to me too
but not tonight as far as I know),
and even though I think of
poems about insomnia
written by excellent poets,
still, I'm weary and hungry
and a little depressed.

I remember myself, a Mennonite farm child
and dreamless ten hour nights in a snug bed
having graham crackers and milk for supper
Sunday evenings before all the family went
to church, comfort food of the homiest kind.
So I am really okay
sitting here in the dark
with the crumbs coming down
on my nightgown
and into the carpet
where in the morning
the dog will sniff and search.

—*Barbara Esch Shisler*

Moneywise Meditations 2.0

Mark R. Wenger

I met John Rudy in 1985. This was right after I got married. Kathy and I were renting an upstairs row-house apartment in Lancaster, Pa. We didn't have much money. I heard John give a stewardship talk at a church conference. He said some things about money that I hadn't heard in seminary. "I'm here to make a reckless confession," he said. "I like money. And no one has ever challenged my confession." My ears pricked up.

"Now of course," he continued, "I hope I don't *love* money, because the Bible warns that such love lies at the root of all evil. I know money is dangerous but it can also be extremely useful. It allows us to seize opportunities for good. To share with others. To extend the kingdom of God."

Not long after, John and his wife Lucy moved back to Pennsylvania and began attending the church where I was associate pastor. I continued to listen when John talked about money. Kathy and I sought his counsel about money management, life insurance, and financial giving. He was wise and sensible. As a former corporate executive and former pastor, he knew finances and he knew faith.

In 1989 John had a book released with the title *Moneywise Meditations*. The book contained a collection of short magazine articles that John had authored over the years. I discovered something else about John: “I am a charity case,” he wrote. “I am. I am totally dependent on a loving, benevolent God. All I am and all I have comes from another. . . . I am in constant need of God’s help, his resources, his guidance, his people” (Herald Press, 1989, p. 27).

Fast forward twenty years to the economic crisis of 2009. John Rudy is now 85 years old. I wondered—What does John have to say about the current national economic mess we’re in? So I sat down with him recently over a cup of coffee at his dining room table. I asked a few questions and then listened. A lot. You see, John remembers the Great Depression as a boy. In light of that perspective, one of the first comments out of his mouth had the ring of truth: “The thing we learn from history is that we don’t learn from history.”

Such as: Housing and real estate values don’t rise forever like some optimistic economists claimed. Banks and businesses will fail from time to time, even big ones. Debt is risky. In addition, John is not very confident that the government will be able to solve the root problems. It’s almost impossible to preserve jobs when no one is buying. “Is this the time,” he asks, “to do some old-fashioned budgeting, saving, and downsizing?”

Very close to John’s heart is his Christian faith and his wish for faith

communities to live up to their commitments as followers of Jesus. “I am concerned,” he said, “that too many people of faith, like the rest of society, began to live affluently without being wealthy.” The ease of consumer credit coupled with more sumptuous lifestyles and paltry savings have left many people unprepared and vulnerable for the lean times.

With a chuckle John wondered aloud how much good all his years of teaching and preaching on stewardship had done. “Maybe the economy will teach us more than the pulpit ever did! Maybe this is how we will really learn to live as good stewards, to honestly adjust our lifestyles to our Christian values, and to expect less.” And maybe congregations as faith communities can step up to the task of pooling resources to take care of needs within their circle and beyond.

John recalled the days in the 1930s when unemployment was 25 percent and tramps or hobos, as they were called, rode the railroads and walked the highways. His boyhood home sat alongside U.S. Route 30, a national highway. Almost every day his mother fed tramps that came to their back door. She never turned them away. And within Stony Brook Mennonite Church, the ordained deacons coordinated congregational care for the financial and material needs of members.

John believes the current crisis can be an opportunity for faith communities to reclaim a voice and role in mutual aid, money management, and in modest lifestyles. Stewardship training should focus on more than

learning how to give generously, however. It should offer help on budgeting, spending, lifestyle, and savings. John also wonders about reviving the role if not the position of deacon: persons officially appointed to look out for the financial needs of members in the congregation.

But faith communities are important in more ways than material aid during times of job loss, business failure, and economic adversity. When the abyss of personal financial ruin threatens, it is reassuring to be knit into a network of ongoing relationships of support and respect. When the bear is growling, a congregation can be a safe place to find shelter and to be reminded that God is the owner of all.

“Congregations can help us not to get too pressured or frazzled,” said John. “I don’t want to be simplistic, but when things are going bad, we need to look up. We can rejoice in our faith in God in the company of other believers.”

The bad economy can be a good teacher if we let it. This theme appeared a number of times during the coffee conversation with John. Trouble will only get worse, he said, if people “keep on barreling along without considering the current environment.”

This is true for individuals and families. It is also true for businesses

and for church institutions. Church organizations “may need to do some downsizing, and not just keep asking for more money. They can’t assume they will stay the same size. They can’t budget without taking the economy into consideration.” John doesn’t think there is anything immoral

about congregations or church organizations developing reserve funds.

I asked John what he’d tell young adults who are starting to live independently. Here is the gist of what he said: “I’d talk with them about the virtue of saving for difficult times. I’d caution them about borrowing to spend. I’d counsel

that they maintain a careful budget. But it shouldn’t be too tight, because they also need to celebrate.

“I’d talk with them about life insurance as a good thing. I’d also speak about tithing and the joy of sharing generously with others. I’d tell them that a reasonable, modest lifestyle is also beneficial. And I’d say, keep looking up, having faith in God. Become part of a good strong faith community. In times like this, people at church become crucial.”

Here’s what seems to sum up John’s sage counsel: Strive to manage finances carefully, embodying simplicity, frugality, and generosity modeled on Jesus’ values, while living in community. It’s really nothing new. I had heard essentially the same thing when I first met John about 25 years ago. It’s also what I’ve read in his book,

Here’s what seems to sum up John’s sage counsel: Strive to manage finances carefully, embodying simplicity, frugality, and generosity modeled on Jesus’ values, while living in community.

Moneywise Meditations. Such wisdom doesn't get old and may be truer than ever today. It sounds strangely contemporary, relevant, and fresh.

All too many of us have been jarred awake from a sugar dream that the stock market and real estate values will always go up. And let's face it: too many of us have been living well today but planning to pay for it tomorrow. We are being forced to confront hard facts; we wince at an uncertain future.

But perhaps this difficult season

can also be an opportunity. Perhaps the bad economy can be a good teacher. Perhaps this can become a springtime of faith in God and a blossoming of the relationships which bind people together. Perhaps this can be a time of pruning—call it “right-sizing”—for greater fruitfulness in another season. Perhaps.

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

Dear Editors

Andrew Moore's contribution to the Winter 2009 issue, “Love As My Strength: A Journal Entry,” is insightful and comforting and will be useful to readers who suffer depression as well as their family and friends. My brother's depression was undiagnosed and he felt too much the pain of civilians caught up in an Asian war. Tragically he left us by his own hand 46 years ago this month. We knew too little to understand or to help him.

Andrew's articulate explanation of how love can heal and shield must be applied to those who suffer. It is comforting to me even now. Thank you for publishing this mature, sensitive, and enlightened explanation. —Edward Telford Stevenson, Arlington, Virginia

Dear Editors:

I was prepared to discontinue DreamSeeker Magazine this year (because I think I just have to cut out SOMETHING), but after reading it, I just couldn't—it's too good. (Something else will get cut). I especially enjoyed the two articles “God's Waiting Room” and “Love As My Strength: A Journal Entry,” the latter being very close to many of my own experiences. So thanks for continuing to publish material that is often closer to what we're actually living! —Wilma Ewert Leichty, Goshen, Indiana

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

It's Just a Pineapple

Kathleen Zehr Nussbaum

My friend lives in a planned community with look-a-like “McMansions” on quarter-acre lots strategically placed in cul-de-sacs throughout a myriad of tree-lined, well-lit streets. This community isn't without its benefits: swimming pools, tennis courts, clubhouses, good schools, and lots of kids to play with. And to be perfectly honest, I have experienced varying degrees of house envy over the last few years.

Yet the liabilities of life in Kings Landing (and hundreds of places like it all over America) seem great. Take the “covenant” you must sign to live here. According to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, a covenant is a “formal, solemn, and binding agreement”. I think of this as applying to deeply sacred contracts like marriage, where you promise faith and fidelity to a life partner—not a contract where you swear to never put a clothes line in your back yard or paint your exterior trim bright teal and pink.

Granted this would be an obnoxious combination of colors, but should a “covenant” really be necessary to prevent this and/or to live in such a community? Apparently so. And apparently my friend and her husband signed one.

So the middle of the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression, Kings Landing decided,

would be a good time to enforce contractual details of the covenants. Kings Landing personnel systematically drove by and inspected all four hundred homes to make sure residents were keeping their driveways clean and clear, lawns raked, shutters painted properly. Then they mailed 400 letters to the residents with warnings about everything from poor lawn care to visible garbage cans.

In the letter my friend got, she and her husband were cited for not having the compulsory, metal “pineapple” on their mail box. So, despite rising unemployment and recent closing of Circuit City in our locality (40,000 jobs across all levels nationwide), a rise in foreclosure rates; and three documented suicides in the last month in our zip code related to economic despair, this lovely planned community wants to make sure everyone’s mailbox has a pineapple on it.

The two hundred dollars spent on postage alone could have been donated to the Virginia Food Bank, which feeds hungry families all over our state and is experiencing record shortfalls this year. The time spent driving through the neighborhood, documenting missing pineapples, and writing letters to degenerate home owners could have been spent calling to check on residents who may have recently lost their jobs, given birth, gotten divorced, or experienced any number of unforeseen changes and calamities.

This lovely planned community wants to make sure everyone’s mailbox has a pineapple on it.

Sadly, this is a microcosm of our culture. *People don’t seem to care about the things that really matter.* We are more concerned about the “pineapple” than the people around us. We want our outsides to look sanitized and perfect.

We don’t want anyone to know that we are struggling . . . that our beds are unmade, our bathrooms have soap scum, the sheets need changing, and, even worse, that *we* are so flawed. We are full of resentment, hubris, greed, envy, and fear. We keep people at arm’s length so as to

continue the façade of our perfect little lives in our perfect little neighborhoods.

Fortunately, the façade is cracking and this just might turn out to be a gift. Yes, our current economic near-depression could turn out to be a gift if it makes people stop pretending. It will be a gift if it stops us from buying things we don’t need, can’t afford, and only want because we are in a trance—the trance of Western greed.

And it will be a gift if it forces us out of hiding and into the light of the real world, there where houses need repair and bathrooms aren’t clean and none of us is without character flaws, bad breath, and body odor. It will be a gift if people stop worrying about the pineapple on the mailbox and start caring about the people inside the house instead.

—*Kathleen Zehr Nussbaum, Mechanicsville, Virginia, is a licensed clinical social worker and supervisor.*

Neither a Saint nor a Celebrity

Deborah Good

In 2004, Dad sent me a card for my twenty-fourth birthday. “Thank you for being there for me,” it read, “and for us as parents. . . I’m looking forward to being with you this weekend. Might you stay awhile?”

At the time, I could have found it funny that he would thank me for “being there” for him when usually *he* was taking care of *me*, not the other way around. We had no way of knowing that our roles would change significantly just a few months later, and that by the time my twenty-fifth birthday came around, he would be gone.

My dad, Nelson Weaver Good, born and raised on a farm in Mennonite Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, had lived in Washington, D.C. for more than thirty-five years when he was diagnosed with adrenocortical cancer at the end of January 2005. His back had been hurting for about two weeks—his first real symptom. After many doctor’s visits and several diagnoses, we learned the horrifying reason for his pain.

I was standing beside Dad’s stretcher at Washington Hospital Center when his assigned doctor approached us with the news. She said that the CT-scan taken two hours earlier showed a large mass on his left

adrenal gland, and spots in his lungs and liver. It was, we would learn, a rare and aggressive cancer that had silently spread from his left adrenal gland to his lungs, liver, and bones.

After decades of *do-ing* and planning, it was quite an adjustment for Dad to be significantly disabled by his illness and capable of so little. Over the next five months, we would spend hours together, talking. Occasionally, we would place a tape recorder between us as he reflected back on his years in Washington.

Thoughtful conversations with my dad were nothing new for me. From a young age, I remember riding back from soccer games or church retreats, and reflecting out loud with Dad about social dynamics—how groups of people related to each other, how girl athletes were treated differently from boys, how kids at school divided themselves along race lines.

Through these conversations, Dad taught me to not only participate in the world, but to observe and analyze it.

In the months and years following Dad's death, waves of grief came and passed. I found myself reflecting on this man who had known me since birth, whose genes lived on in my DNA, and whose story was and will always be inextricably intertwined with mine. I found myself writing about him. I listened to his voice in our tape-recorded conversations, I transcribed and edited his words, and, eventually, a book emerged.

My dad was a realist. He made all his decisions very carefully, never on a

whim. I still cannot leave my Philadelphia home on a dark, urban night without his voice in my head. "Never take unnecessary risks," he liked to remind me. "Never take unnecessary risks."

I also can't look at the basketball hoop hanging in the alley behind my childhood home in D.C. without thinking about Dad and his head full of risk-calculation. Ever since he built the backboard out of old floorboards and braced it to our garage roof, he insisted that we keep it locked up between games. This involves wrapping a chain diagonally across the rim and locking it in place with a padlock, so no basketball can fit through.

"Dad, I don't understand why we have to keep the hoop locked," I remember saying insistently. "It seems so selfish. Why do you act like we're better than other people?" I was an adolescent with a lot of answers. I also went to school with kids in the neighborhood who knew about the chain, and I was embarrassed.

"Have you seen what happened to other hoops in the neighborhood? How long have they lasted?" Dad would respond impatiently. We'd had this conversation before. He went on to list them: the hoop down the alley that was there about a month when it got dunked on and broken. Another one that drew so many complaints from neighbors, they had to take it down. "If we leave our hoop unlocked," he continued, "and kids start hanging out in our alley, making noise, maybe even bringing drugs."

That was a complete sentence, because I could guess how it ended. The

neighbors would complain, the cops might get involved, we'd have to take the hoop down, and then we would never be able to play basketball in our alley again.

"I still think it's selfish," I said again, stubbornly, and turned to go upstairs.

"Deborah, I didn't move to the city yesterday." Apparently he wasn't done. "I have spent years in the inner city, and trying to create safe places for fun to happen. It's not that I don't care. It's that I do, and I understand how these things work."

I am not convinced that Dad's answers were all exactly right, but he always had a thorough explanation for why he did what he did. And he was convinced it was this intentionality and moderation that kept him in the city year after year—nearly forty in all.

My dad was neither a saint nor a celebrity, and he knew this about himself. His humility was part of what made him so easy to love. Throughout his life, Dad consciously nurtured the communities to which he belonged. He understood that goodhearted people don't simply de-

cide to up and change the world by themselves. He believed that when we intentionally bring people together, we create the space for ideas to grow, for groups to decide to do radical things—like start schools for troubled kids in inner-city D.C. or retreat centers in mountainous West Virginia—and then provide support for each other when things get rough.

And when things got rough, my parents' communities—who by extension became my own—brought us meals, researched alternative treatments, sent countless cards and emails, surrounded us with love and desperate prayers. It was a gift that changed me forever.

—Deborah Good, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, is a Master of Social Work student at Temple University. This essay was adapted from excerpts of her recent book, *Long After I'm Gone: A Father-Daughter Memoir* (DreamSeeker Books imprint of Cascadia Publishing House, 2009), in which she intertwines her reflections with the voice of her late father, Nelson Good. Deborah can be reached at deborahagood@gmail.com.

My dad was neither a saint nor a celebrity, and he knew this about himself.



My Trip on the Space Shuttle and What I Learned from It

Noël R. King

The kids at my high school could hardly believe it when they found out that I had won a big internship to go on the space shuttle trip this summer. They all think that I'm a crackup, a big loser, but I have news for them. Maybe I *am* a big loser, but I think I am also the one going on the space shuttle now, aren't I?

I filled out the application (I found it in *Space* magazine in our beat-up school library) during English class, a nice, relaxing class where Mrs. Wilcox's voice usually hums along in the background with words like "plot," "setting," and "dramatic irony."

My friend Jimmy goes, "Pssst! What are you doing?" He sits in the desk lined up with mine just across

the aisle. We both play on the football team, which is about all we have in common, him being so cool and me not. I don't exactly weigh enough to be playing football, but who cares, man. I made the team, didn't I?

I mouthed back, "Filling out a form!"

He goes, "Form?" with his forehead all wrinkled up. He had no clue what I was talking about. I doubt he has ever filled out a form in his entire life. I at least am good at that.

That was just a couple months ago. Now here I am, up in this crampy little space shuttle even as we speak. The liftoff was pretty amazing, although I think I must have passed out somewhere along the way because I really don't remember much of it except that I felt like I was being smashed into my seat something awful.

The guys up here are pretty nice, along with the one woman. They showed me everything, especially how to move around and use my suit and stuff. The suit even has a place to hold my iPod, I was happy to see, although it (the suit) smells kind of rubbery and like something electric is burning.

The plan at the beginning was that we would take several days to reach the space station, where I would hang out with everybody for a couple of weeks. Then I would catch a ride back to Earth with some Russian interns who were supposed to be coming back home by then. (A plane would take me from Moscow to

Washington, D.C., after we landed back on Earth.)

You should have seen how freaked out everybody got when they saw how way off course we were.

Who knows what the plan is now, though. The second night we were up here, I was the only one hanging around this one control panel. Everybody else had all these lists of things to do, plus they were supposed to get some sleep, too, so they were not paying any attention to me, which turned out to be both a good thing and a pretty bad thing, too.

I really don't think I bumped it that much, but there was this stick shift kind of thing right next to this one part I was holding onto, and when I just barely touched it, it moved into this different slot than the one it had been in before.

Oh my goodness. You should have seen how freaked out everybody got when they saw how way off course we were just a few hours later. Instead of getting ready to dock up with the space station, we were honing in on Jupiter's moons, or at least we were heading enough in that direction that we could start seeing them more and more clearly. I did not tell anybody about the possible stick shift incident. I am just an intern. What in the world would they want to hear from me for at a time like that?

Soon after that I called my mom by using that satellite communicator thing they have up here. My dad was still at work when I called because I forgot that Earth is like a bazillion hours either behind or ahead of us here, and my mom just happened to

be home that day. She wanted to know if I was behaving, and I said, “Of course, Mom! I am a senior, for goodness sakes! I know how to behave!”

I didn’t tell her about the stick shift thingy incident. Why give her something else to worry about, what with her son already being such a loser as it is?

“Alright, then, honey,” she said. “You be good.”

“Of course, Mom,” I said. “See you soon, bye!”

I think I will probably wait until I am really old, like maybe 50, before writing my tell-all book about how I really messed up this space shuttle trip. Because now we have been floating around up here for more than a month, trying real hard to get back on track to dock with that pesky space station somewhere out here. They say if we don’t get there soon we might

need a rescue ship to come on out here and get us down.

I kind of think that would be fun, but secretly I feel more than a little worried that the longer we stay up here the more chance there is of me just babbling it all out about the stick shift incident. So, really, I just want to get off of this thing now and go back to my house on Cleveland Street, Cleveland, Ohio, United States of America, (holy, blessed) Earth.

I am done with space for now, although it has been real fun for the most part and I have learned a lot through my adversities up here. Especially the part about how one little bump can really change things!

—As circumstances warrant, through her Turquoise Pen column Noël R. King, Scottsville, Virginia, reports on strange and wonderful or worrisome things, including bumping a shuttle stick not all that hard.



Stamina

Renee Gehman

On my mark, get set, GO.

This is an article on stamina. The situational irony is that I myself am experiencing possible stamina insufficiencies. Stamina could help me write a solid, 750-word-article in one great, disciplined, and timely effort, but circumstances have rendered me incapable of such sustained longevity, and I write this article not as a peak performer, but as a struggler.

Let me catch my breath . . .

Okay.

I like the idea of stamina. It’s a strong word, packing a punch in the first syllable, unlike the less-impressive “endurance.” Stamina is stronger than endurance. You may endure your mother-in-law at a holiday dinner, but you aren’t really showing signs of stamina until she has moved into your house and your endurance has continued. (I can say this, because I don’t have a mother-in-law; I’ve just heard enough rumors to deem this a helpful illustration for the masses.)

Stamina is the ability to knuckle down, buckle down, and to *stay* knuckled and buckled down for an exceptional length of time. Stamina scoffs in the face of the quick-fix, and it scorns the instant and the easy.

Water break. (I kid you not; I really am pausing to hydrate.)

A teacher transitioning from a classroom of three-year-olds to a classroom of eleventh graders should know a thing or two about stamina. Waning stamina in three-year-olds is often successfully remedied with a nap. This is not as helpful a plan of action for an eleventh grader who, upon being asked for a one-paragraph written response, woe-fully moans from across the room, “You’re killing me! I’m going to have carpal tunnel syndrome!” In eleventh grade, stamina must frequently be encouraged: *I assure you I am not killing you. I am quite confident that you can write one paragraph without even getting writer’s cramp, let alone carpal tunnel syndrome!*

Stretch break. (Still not kidding.)

Personal stamina for this transitioning teacher becomes an issue, too. Challenges to face include those common to any transition—learning new tasks and skills, navigating a new environment, meeting new people, developing a new routine, and other assorted newnesses. Adaptation to these newnesses, sometimes stressful, sometimes exciting, and often a combination of both, requires a great deal of stamina. Particularly where “navigating a new environment” is concerned, at least in a place where hallways and stairs abound.

Stamina is the ability to knuckle down, buckle down, and to stay knuckled and buckled down for an exceptional length of time.

Bathroom break. (Which is less of a break until navigating a new environment is mastered.)

Back in December, when I was young and carefree and hadn’t gotten my first two grey hairs yet, I was comfortably settled into a routine, confident in my stamina, and I signed up for a half marathon. I had run one in 2005, so I looked forward to this renewed challenge and promptly printed out a training schedule for the “Intermediate” half-marathoner, an upgrade from the “Novice” program.

Now the race is a week away, and, having felt it necessary to focus my stamina on other, non-athletic aspects of my life, I have run a grand total of five miles in the past three weeks. Is it worth it to go at all, I have asked myself, as I will obviously be lacking the stamina necessary for running a dignified race?

Break for . . . for continuity’s sake?

The apostle Paul spoke, on more than one occasion, of running races, and I see two assertions in what he said: first, run to win; second, don’t run in vain. I hesitate to make this potentially apples-to-oranges comparison, but I do want to pause a moment on this concept of running a race in vain.

I certainly can’t win this half marathon. I won’t be able to run the entire 13.1 miles without walking breaks or breaks to stretch out a side

stitch. But at least I will be knuckling down and buckling down just by committing to making an effort. And I suppose the race is made *more* “in vain” when it is abandoned entirely than when it is attempted with all the stamina one can muster.

Stamina implies strength, yes. But I suspect you don’t have to appear or feel strong to have it. After all, doesn’t it take more strength to press on when you’re feeling ill-equipped, unprepared, or otherwise lacking in the capacity to run a good race?

In the face of the slings and arrows

of life, the trials and tribulations, and any other related clichés that apply, you do what you can. Run your race when you can, walk it when you need to, pause if you must. But see it through, whatever “it” may be—career transitions, troubling economic times, relationship woes, 13.1 miles . . .

Or 750 words.

—*Renee Gehman, Souderton, Pennsylvania, is assistant editor of Dream-Seeker Magazine. It took all her stamina to complete this column.*



Water Into Wine

Elaine Greensmith Jordan

John and I drove into Prescott to Doctor Caccavale's office, the Arizona sun of late February glaring in our eyes. Leukemia had made my husband's pale complexion transparent, but he chose to do the driving. I squinted at the San Francisco Peaks in the distance, noticing a sunlit dusting of snow on the two points.

The doctor told us that John had only a short time left.

"I can't imagine what you must be feeling," I told my husband later, on the way home. The rattling of our old Chrysler annoyed me; the car should have respected the gravity of the news we'd been given.

"I'm not surprised . . . just stunned, I guess," John said. "I've had a year to get used to this, and it begins to become sort of . . . real. It doesn't scare me most of the time." We didn't speak for a while, and the car clattered along. "Caccavale said it would be painless if it's a hemorrhage," he added, his blue eyes hidden behind his aviator sunglasses.

"I know . . . I think we should get hospice right away," I said.

"Yeah, but I get to interview them." John's deep voice sounded firm now. "Can't stand those bleeding-heart types . . . Better get this car checked."

When we arrived home, I followed my husband up the stairs from the garage, aware of the effort for him. His khaki pants hung loosely from his belt, and I noticed the heavy cords at the back of his neck.

Sitting on the couch in front of the muted television later that month, John frowned at the tumbler of bright green vegetable juice in his hand. While the Gulf War sparked and streaked across the screen, my husband drank part of the celery-smelling concoction developed by a scientist at Yale. Then he headed for the bathroom where he vomited the formula. I called hospice, and they reached Charlotte—a neighborhood hospice volunteer and member of our church—who came over immediately.

Arrangements were made for a protracted confinement, but in three days Charlotte awakened me from a nap in time to take John in my arms. He was going, she said. His breathing slowed, and he stared upward as if trying to see something. Then I felt he'd gone, even before he moved slightly and sighed into a gentle death.

In May I returned to my work as minister at a Congregational church in Dewey, Arizona. We were a small church in the northern high country, and I'd been the minister there for five years. Nothing special about that, except I was a woman in a profession from which women had been excluded for two thousand years.

When we arrived home, I followed my husband up the stairs from the garage, aware of the effort for him.

I seldom felt lonely after John's death. Maybe it was the attentive church members, or the restoring landscape of Arizona's north country, with its mountains, multi-colored canyons, and electrical storms. One morning that spring, considering sermon preparations, I sat in my office enjoying the view outside my window. The desert scene of Manzanita brush was punctuated with new wildflowers in purple and white, and the Bradshaw Mountains in the distance stood as constant as God.

I knew I wouldn't be disturbed. Our fussy choir director had been fired. I had no secretary. No one would need to fix the heater or sand down the peeling front door.

I reread the account of the wedding at Cana in the New Testament. Jesus, the story goes, transformed water into wine to provide for the guests at the party. *How does life become wine when it's been thin and watery? That's got potential: water into wine.*

I was wrong about my privacy that morning. I heard a knock at the church door. When you try to do as Jesus would have done, you open doors and welcome whoever is there, but I glanced through the peephole before I opened the door to a small man in grimy clothes.

"Where's the preacher?" he asked, standing in the parking lot several feet back from the doorway. Before I could answer, he bellowed, "Gotta see the preacher. I got these troubles. Need money."

"I'm the minister here," I said, trying to sound sure of myself. "I can offer you some—"

He took a step back, as if confronted by the evil eye. "You ain't no minister! I wanna see the real minister!" He got smaller in his retreat, his hands held in fists.

"I assure you—" I started.

"You're a woman, for Christ's sake!"

I held on to the door-jamb, trying to look clerical. "Well, yes, but I'm the minister of this church, and—"

"I know why this church is going to hell, *lady*. It's because of people like *you*!"

I had no answer for that remark, feeling as absurd as this man characterized me.

"I can't talk to you. You ain't even got a Bible!" My visitor took some choking breaths and moved away, his halting crooked pace as slow as my husband's.

Back in my office, after the encounter in the doorway, I took a sip of cold coffee. My visitor's words, "You're a woman, for Christ's sake," rang in my head. Some day I'd remember that as funny.

I looked at my notes about changing water into wine but couldn't concentrate. I thought of the absurdity of my being here in the Arizona desert, a recent widow who'd been insulted by a man who wanted me to carry a Bible. That was funny too. Changing the water of entrenched ideas about male clerical leadership into the rich wine of a diverse clergy could not be

done, as Jesus did, at a party. It would take people like me doing our job. I did not feel like a pioneer for women's rights; I preferred to imagine myself a movie star in a filmy gown.

My choice to leave my life as a high school teacher and go to Berkeley to prepare for ministry astounds me. That I sought to offer leadership in the Christian church is an example of how we stumble into things and then figure out later what got us there. I do know I had a need to enter into holy places and learn about the religious spirit.

I'm not your conventional Christian. I've annoyed plenty of folk, like the caller at the church door, but I never intended to cause a fuss. I'm a tall, plain schoolteacher type—brown eyes behind glasses—who ought to be on the silver screen.

I ended my time at the Congregational church a year after John's death. By then, the members of our little church had undermined my snobbery, cleared my theological head, and listened to me. They stood beside me through John's illness too. Being with them softened my guilt and dissipated my grief, transforming the water of my days into the wine of recovery.

I wish I'd done a better job as their minister. If I had another chance, I hope I'd give up my biases—against annoying talkers, conservative believers, self-righteous ideologues—that emerged in me during my ministry. I like to think that next time I'd have

"I know why this church is going to hell, *lady*. It's because of people like *you*!"

more courage to challenge bigotry against clerical women.

There will not be a next time, of course. But I have some new understanding of how difficult leadership is and how many times our stumbling is the best we can offer.

—*Elaine Jordan, Prescott, Arizona, writes essays to sort out the moral complexities of serving people as their pastor. This essay first appeared in slightly different form at www.verbsap.com. Her awards include the Nonfiction Prize from the*

Preservation Foundation and the Florida State Writing Competition. Her essays have appeared in South Loop Review, Passages, Dreamseeker Magazine, New Works Review, The Georgetown Review, and other journals and anthologies. An excerpt from her unpublished memoir, Mrs. Ogg Played the Harp, won an award from the San Francisco branch of American PEN Women, Bayou Magazine, and the California Writers Club. See more at www.elainejordan.com



She Called Me “Sir”

Starla J. King

She called me “sir” today, as I was picking out roses for Valentine’s Day. This happens . . . not that often . . . but it happens, so I’m used to it. But today for some reason it bothered me.

I certainly don’t blame anyone for thinking I’m a guy—I do tend to dress that way, and I do have the short-cropped hair styled more like a guy’s hair than a girl’s. Look at the picture and you can see it too, the “sir” you might mistake at a glance.

So why today is “sir” not rolling off with a chuckle? Because it’s not me. Inside I am woman, girl, female. I am so proud to be a woman, so thankful to be a woman, so honored to be a woman.

Yet I often dress like a guy because somehow that resonates with me. I feel strong, confident, beautiful, sexy in those clothes. I feel authentic in those clothes. But it doesn’t mean I don’t still feel like a strong, confident, beautiful, sexy woman.

I can’t explain it, but somehow I feel even more woman when I dress in the clothes that suit me . . . even when they’re boy clothes.

Still on some days I need to dress to the hilt in totally “girly” clothing, trading the faux-hawk hairstyle for a gently feminine side-swirl, adding an extra layer of makeup (including lipstick), finished off with a

light scent of Hugo “Deep Red” for women instead of my standard Burberry “Touch” for men.

We are complex beings, we humans. Gay, straight, or somewhere in-between, we are all complex, beautiful human beings. And today I’m reminded that we don’t need to figure it all out—for ourselves or for anyone else.

—Starla J. King, Ashburn, Virginia, is a garden designer, writer, and photographer. She co-owns Signature Landscapes, LLC (www.signaturelandscapes.com) with her life partner Sandy and enjoys the creative freedom of blogging at <http://starlajking.wordpress.com>.



The Shadow of a Doubt

A Film Review

David Greiser

A while ago I made my usual year-end list of movies to see over the Christmas holiday. The end of the year always promises a rash of good movies, as directors and distributors jockey for attention from critics, with the Academy Award nominations just around the corner. Near the top of my list of must-sees this year was a little gem simply called “Doubt.”

“Doubt” originated as a play from the pen of the highly respected playwright John Patrick Shanley, who also created the script for “Moonstruck.” The play version of “Doubt” garnered a Pulitzer Prize in 2004. It is not likely to get the same level of attention from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts, which historically has passed over most plays that are transformed into films (A notable exception would be the 1985 Best Picture winner, “Amadeus”).

As a rule, plays that become films can be tedious and talky on the big screen. Though “Doubt” is certainly longer on talk than on action, the awards committee may want to take a second look at it anyway. With its timely subject, stellar cast, and tightly crafted writing, “Doubt” keeps you thinking, feeling, decid-

ing and, yes, doubting, from beginning to end.

The story unfolds in 1964, at St. Nicholas’ Church and Parish School in the Bronx. The school is housed in one of those aging, airless buildings in which you smell the mixture of chalk dust, wood finish, and the hint of too many chili-concarne lunches as soon as you walk through the door. There is controversy, too, in the air—controversy brought on by the early upheavals of Vatican II.

St. Nicholas’ School is ruled by the severe, humorless Sister Aloysius (played by a black-habited Meryl Streep). Sister Aloysius shuns all forms of change, right down to the innovation of ballpoint pens in her school (“Penmanship is dying all over the country!”) She has taken up a power struggle with the popular and progressive, Vatican II-spouting new priest of the parish, Father Flynn (Philip Seymour Hoffman). Though initially deferential to the new Father, Sister Aloysius is clearly not accustomed to having her traditional authority over the school questioned.

Her latest protégé is Sister James, a naive first year teacher (played by a wide-eyed Amy Adams) who becomes an unwitting lamb caught between experienced wolves. Sister James believes in the goodness of her students, a concept Sister Aloysius is eager to expunge.

In one scene, Sister Aloysius instructs Sister James to hang a portrait of the Holy Father on the blackboard.

“Doubt” keeps you thinking, feeling, deciding and, yes, doubting, from beginning to end.

When Sister James objects that it is not a picture of the *current* pope, Sister Aloysius sputters, “What difference does it make?! When you look at the glass, you can see a reflection of what the students are doing at their seats!” For Sister Aloysius, even the youngest are presumed guilty until proven innocent.

Sister James confides to Sister Aloysius that she suspects Father Flynn of having a sexually abusive relationship with Donald Miller—an eighth grader who happens to be the school’s first African-American student. Sister James smells alcohol on Donald’s breath following a private meeting with Father Flynn in the rectory.

Some of the best scenes in the movie follow this accusation. In one, Sister Aloysius lures Father Flynn to her office under the pretext of discussing the school Christmas pageant. When Father Flynn surmises that the conversation is really about his relationship with one of the students, he rises slowly from the principal’s desk where he has been sitting, and Sister Aloysius takes his place.

From then on, Sister Aloysius controls the conversation. The interrogation is emotionally taut, employing close-ups and the extensive dramatic range of two of the best film actors working today.

A second powerful scene involves a conversation between Sister Aloysius and Donald Miller’s mother (played by Viola Davis). Mrs. Miller

fears that her son will be expelled from school, and she appeals to Sister Aloysius to drop her investigation. Although she is only on screen for one scene, Viola Miller's performance as the mother in an impossible situation may be the most stunning in the whole film. See it for yourself and decide.

Is Father Flynn guilty of sexual abuse? "Doubt" leaves us doubting. Or maybe not. I saw this film with two other persons, and the conversation afterward was fascinating and vigorous. One person was sure the priest was guilty. Another was certain he was not. The third was uncertain. Since then, I've spoken to others who saw the film and were equally certain that they knew "the truth" about what actually happened.

Thomas

I was the doubter, but the others had
Their reservations, too. I spoke my doubts
And he did not condemn. An honest doubt
For him was worth more than a wavering faith
That harbors secret doubts and covers them
With pious platitudes. For me a faith
That dares not question is no faith at all.

And doubt can be the growing end of faith
Sending down deep roots to hold it fast
Against the storms of life. My faith is strong
Because I dared to doubt.

—Ann M. Schultz, Rochester, Minnesota

Such is the mark of good writing about a sensitive contemporary subject. "Doubt" takes us into a world forty years removed from our own, yet it does so in a way that reveals how little both the world and the church have truly changed in the interim. The clothing may have been modernized and the Mass given a facelift. But the larger questions of power and accountability need answering, not only in the Catholic Church but the whole Christian church. About that nature of challenge, "Doubt" leaves us little doubt at all.

—Dave Greiser directs the Pastoral Ministries Program and teaches in the Bible and Ministry Department at Hesston College, in Hesston, Kansas.

In a World of Power and Domination

Reviews of *A People's History of the United States, The Powers That Be, and Honest Patriots*

Daniel Hertzler

A People's History of the United States, by Howard Zinn. (Harper Perennial, 2005).

The Powers That Be, by Walter Wink. Augsburg Fortress, 1998.

Honest Patriots, by Donald W. Shriver Jr. Oxford University Press, 2005.

The interpretation of history is in the mind of the historian. The history we have too often received has been history from "above." When I was in grade school, images of Washington and Lincoln dominated the room. Historians seem fascinated by kings and generals, wars, and other conflicts.

In *A People's History*, Howard Zinn has deliberately looked for what can be discovered about ordinary people. He reveals his bias early in the book: He will repre-

sent the victims rather than the oppressors. “I prefer to try to tell the story of the discovery of America from the viewpoint of the Arawaks, of the Constitution from the standpoint of the slaves, of Andrew Johnson as seen by the Cherokees.” Not, as he acknowledges, that the lines of opposition are necessarily clear. “In the long run, the oppressor is also a victim. In the short run (and so far human history has consisted only of short runs) the victims themselves, desperate and tainted with the culture that oppresses them, turn on other victims” (10).

Donald W. Shriver has a similar concern. Indeed he quotes Zinn a number of times. However, the burden of his presentation is to show how countries deal with negative memories. This is illustrated by his subtitle, *Loving a Country Enough to Remember It's Misdeeds*. Shriver is an ethicist and president emeritus of Union Theological Seminary in New York, so his presentation has theological overtones which Zinn's lacks. However I find Wink dealing more incisively with the issues between church and state.

Zinn, who is a veteran of World War II, does not glorify war. He shows that from the beginning of the U.S. it has been the task of the elites who own the property to persuade the lower classes to go out as soldiers and protect the property of the elites. “The rich, it turns out, could avoid the draft by paying for substitutes; the poor had to serve” (75).

Zinn's book provides an extensive list of suppression by the rich in their efforts to retain their riches and ex-

plot opportunities. The account begins with the economic status of some of the Founding Fathers. “George Washington was the richest man in America. John Hancock was a prosperous Boston merchant. Benjamin Franklin was a wealthy printer. And so on” (85).

What more can be said? Quite a bit. The Mexican War, Zinn observes, “was a war of the American elite against the Mexican elite, each side exhorting, using, killing its own population as well as the other” (166). He describes the development of modern American corporations, highlighting the machinations of J. P. Morgan, John D. Rockefeller, and Andrew Carnegie. “And so it went, in industry after industry—shrewd, efficient business men building empires, choking out competition, maintaining high prices, keeping wages low, using government subsidies” (257).

The beginning of American empire is illustrated by an account of William McKinley, the pious president called upon to decide whether to take over the Philippines after Spain had been defeated in the Spanish-American War. Zinn reports, “As one story has it, President McKinley told a group of ministers visiting the White House how he came to his decision.” According to the story, “I went down on my knees and prayed Almighty God for light and guidance more than one night.” The answer finally came that we should “take them all and educate the Filipinos and Christianize them.”

Zinn comments that “The Filipinos did not get the same message

from God. . . . It took the United States three years to crush the rebellion” (312-313).

World War I, as Zinn recounts it, was another case of ordinary persons doing the dirty work on behalf of the upper class. “Ten million were to die on the battlefield; 20 million were to die of hunger and disease related to the war. And no one since that day has been able to show that the war brought any gain for humanity that would be worth one human life” (359).

He describes some of the tensions caused by U.S. participation in this war. Among those against the war was Eugene Debs, a Socialist leader who “was arrested for violating the Espionage Act.” Zinn reports that some 900 persons were imprisoned for violating this act (367-368).

I remember that some Mennonite leaders were harassed for opposition to the war as described by James Juhnke in *Vision, Doctrine, War* (Herald Press, 1989). Among them was Bishop Aaron Loucks, who had visited Mennonite draftees and encouraged them not to accept noncombatant work. “Although the Justice department and camp authorities wanted to prosecute Loucks, the War department let him off with a stern warning. In Frederick Keppel's ironic words, the warning ‘put the fear of God into him’” (239).

Following the war and into the 1920s, “prosperity was concentrated at the top” (382). Throughout and

following World War II much the same prevailed. Although some of us can remember a time after this war when the workingman could support a family on his income, “By the end of the Reagan years the gap between the rich and the poor in the United States had grown dramatically” (581). The unhappy litany of the rich against the poor continues. Zinn observes that “in 1998, one of every three working-class people in the United States had jobs paying at or below the federal poverty level” (662).

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In an “Afterword,” Zinn comments, “What struck me as I began to study history was how nationalist fervor—inculcated from childhood on by pledges of allegiance, national anthems, flags waving and rhetoric blowing permeated the educational systems of all countries, including our own.” He wonders also “how foreign policies of the United States would look if we wiped out the national boundaries of the world, at least in our minds, and thought of all children everywhere as our own” (685).

This is about as close as Zinn comes to a theological statement. Throughout the book I found myself saying “Yes, yes” over and over but not feeling completely satisfied because of the seeming lack of a theological perspective. So I'm including here Walter Wink's *The Powers That Be*. At 200 pages it is introduced as “in large part a digest of the third volume of my tril-

ogy on the Powers” (iv). I also have that larger book on my shelf, but the digest is easier to deal with.

As a theologian, Wink offers a spiritual interpretation of political structures, giving those of us who have aspired to worship God instead of the state a place to stand. I include Wink’s book in this review with an apology because I used it once before (*DreamSeeker*, Winter 2005) in connection with two books on consumerism which I perceived needed the addition of Wink’s perspective. What follows here is a more thorough presentation of Wink’s thesis than appeared earlier.

Wink points out that the Powers That Be are necessary. They are the functioning entities of our society. “They are the systems themselves, the institutions and structures that weave society into an intricate fabric of power and relationships. . . . We could do nothing without them. Who wants to be without timely mail delivery or well-maintained roads? But the Powers are also the source of unmitigated evils” (1). It is evil aspects of the Powers which Zinn has documented.

Wink asserts that “Temporally the Powers were created, they are fallen, and they shall be redeemed. . . . Conservatives stress the first, revolutionaries the second, reformers the third. The Christian is expected to hold together all three” (32). As Christians we are called upon not to demonize those who do evil but to ask them to follow the ideals which they have already professed. However, too often we will find them enmeshed in “The Domination System.”

This system “is characterized by unjust economic relations, oppressive political relations, biased race relations, patriarchal gender relations, hierarchical power relations, and the use of violence to maintain them all” (39). The system, Wink observes, is supported by “the Myth of Redemptive Violence. It enshrines the belief that violence saves, that war brings peace, that might makes right.” This is also, Wink says, “the real myth of the modern world. It, and not Judaism or Christianity or Islam, is the dominant religion in our society” (42).

Wink finds this myth articulated in the creation myth of the ancient Babylonians. Today, he says, it predominates in children’s cartoons as well as in “comics, video and computer games, and movies. But we also encounter it in the media, in sports, in nationalism, in militarism, in foreign policy, in televangelism, in the religious right, and in self-styled militia groups” (49).

This theological perspective helps to interpret the repressions described in Zinn’s book. As Wink puts it, this myth “uses the traditions, rites, customs, and symbols of Christianity to enhance both the power of a select wealthy minority and the goals of the nation narrowly defined.” He wonders which would cause a bigger disturbance: “removing the American flag from your church sanctuary or removing the cross” (59)?

To this point Wink has illuminated issues which Zinn describes. Beginning with chapter 3, “Jesus’ Answer to Domination,” he proposes a

Christian response. In his life, teachings, and personal sacrifice, Jesus challenged the Domination System. “The ‘Christus Victor’ (‘Christ is Victor’) theory of the atonement proclaimed release of the captives to those who had formerly been deluded and enslaved by the Domination System. And it portrayed Jesus as set against that system with all his might” (89).

However, Wink observes that after it became official under Constantine, “The church no longer saw the demonic as lodged in the empire, but in the empire’s enemies” (90). Augustine also helped things along by his articulation of the just war theory. “Christians ever since have been justifying wars fought for nothing more than national interest as ‘just’” (99). So in chapters 5 to 9 Wink considers what alternatives Christians may have to the accepted forms of national violence.

He considers Jesus’ teaching recorded in Matthew 5, which suggests “take the law and push into the point of absurdity” (110). He includes a chapter on nonviolence and warns that “if we’re to make nonviolence effective, we will have to be as willing to suffer and be killed as soldiers in battle” (118).

In chapter 8 “But What If . . . ?” he observes that “The vast number of Christians reject nonviolence not only because of confusion about its biblical foundations, but because there are too many situations where

they can’t conceive of its working” (145). So he includes a number of examples of people confronted by violence who responded nonviolently and survived.

In chapter 10 he considers “Prayer and the Powers” and observes that prayer needs to accompany social action. “We must discern not only the outer, political manifestations of the Powers, but also their inner spirituality, and lift the Powers, inner and outer, to God for transformation. Otherwise we change only the shell and leave the spirit intact”

(197).

This is a tall order and puts the whole enterprise on a level not anticipated by Zinn’s book. It also offers an alternative to the prevailing theology in our culture. Many theologians still seem inclined to support the idea of a just war and to divide between a good war and a bad war.

It appears that this prevailing theology is represented by Donald W. Shriver’s *Honest Patriots*, but this is nevertheless a remarkable book. Anyone who teaches European, African, or American history should by all means consult it. Shriver has examined the cases of three countries in terms of how they have dealt with the memories of past “misdeeds.” He is particularly impressed by the way German historians have illuminated the Holocaust through museums and history books for high school stu-

Wink observes that after it became official under Constantine, “The church no longer saw the demonic as lodged in the empire, but in the empire’s enemies.”

dents. He notices “the candor, realism and comprehensiveness of accounts for reading by German youth” (57).

As for South Africa, we would not equate apartheid with the Holocaust. Also, numbers of the perpetrators are still at large in the country. As Shriver observes, “Three-centuries-old scars of colonialism and apartheid will litter South African landscape and memory for a long time” (69). He finds that the various efforts urging South Africans to work toward reconciliation have invited people to join a pilgrimage. Some are ready to join and some are not. But it is an example for others to consider in undertaking their own programs to deal with a troubled past.

Then Shriver comes to the U.S., in relation to which he has one chapter regarding slavery and the African-Americans and another on repressions of the Native Americans. How shall these past misdeeds be recounted and interpreted? He begins with his own childhood experience growing up in Virginia, where his family employed a maid at \$10 for a five-and-a-half-day week. “I do not remember ever asking my father ‘Is \$10 a week enough to live on?’” (129).

He describes the efforts of three communities as well as the state of Oregon to deal with issues of racism in their past. Also he finds a remarkable textbook in *The American Nation* by Paul Boyer, in which “the hooks to learning are so varied, colorful and inviting the casual reviewer will know immediately that the book demands a

lot of students but even more of teachers” (173).

For Native Americans the issues are not the same and seemingly more difficult to “rectify.” Shriver reviews the sad story of mistreatment and failed treaties, of how the Indians were repeatedly pressed to leave their lands. So today “Every contemporary American lives in places where once lived members of one or another of the 550 Indian nations who we know populated the current

bounds of the United States” (210).

Europeans and Native Americans had contrasting views on land. The Europeans assumed that land could be bought and sold. The Native Americans saw it differently. “Once a metal pot was bought or sold, Indians knew that the seller had no right of arbitrary repossession. But land was different. It was home. It was the place where the ancestors had lived from time immemorial, and where they were buried” (225).

One interesting datum Shriver includes is that the Native Americans have not gone away. “Their continent-wide population had shrunk drastically by 1900 (to 237,000) from a probable 7 million in 1492. The figure is now about 2 million” (230). Among the signs of progress Shriver notes is a “National Museum of the American Indian on the mall in Washington D.C.” (260).

The final chapter of Shriver’s book is entitled “Being Human While Being American.” There he provides his own perspective on the issues he

Europeans and Native Americans had contrasting views on land.

raises. I find that he represents a chastened Calvinism of one branch of the established U.S. Protestant church. He has repeatedly quoted Reinhold Niebuhr—who was good at describing moral issues but seemed hesitant to propose radical Christian responses.

I find Walter Wink more helpful in sorting out the issues. It seems that Wink supports the Anabaptist understanding that there is a church and

state and the church people need to have a clear view of the spiritual dimension of political realities and approach them spiritually first. Only then can we know how to respond to the repressive tendencies of power politics.

—*Daniel Hertzler, Scottsdale, Pennsylvania, is an editor, writer, and chair of the elders, Scottsdale Mennonite Church.*



Will You Hold Me As I Held You?

Michael A. King

Scattered throughout Scripture are variations on the saying that “all flesh is grass” or, as Psalm 103:15-16 puts it, “As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, its place knows it no more.” The image has come to me often these days. It came as I helped my father join my mother in assisted living. It came as the aching of an old knee injury was joined by a twisting of the other knee and the deepening awareness that I too am fading grass. It came as a loved congregational co-worker received word of cancer.

We are grass. The wind passes over us. We are gone. And our place knows us no more. Sorrow lurks here or maybe more accurately, sorrow overwhelms here. We are born falling into death. The flesh as grass image forces us to see, feel, mourn this.

Interestingly, however, Scripture rarely touches on people as grass without then underscoring that something is not grass: God. As Psalm 103:17 promises, “But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting. . . .”

Bummer. Because the hope travels with and doesn’t simply overcome the sorrow. Psalm 103 gives us sorrow and hope inextricably mingled, inviting awareness that the grass withers even as we pray there is more.

I also suspect that for many of us it’s in family life that we experience this mingling in its most primal form. We’re born into family as children and experience in family the shock of becoming, in turn, the parent. We start out seeing parents as giants in the land. I doubt we ever quite get over our disbelief that the teenage bagger at the grocery store is suddenly younger than we are. Wait, now it’s our teacher. Whoa, now it’s our boss. Hey, now it’s the president of the United States!

And the wind keeps blowing. Until one day we find ourselves holding the parents who first held us. Then how could sorrow not swamp us? Something seems so backward about this. How did we get from dependent to depended on? How can it be that we now seek to offer a haven to the ones who first offered it to us?

And how can it be that we are to do this even as our own bodies are starting to wear out, promising our own time of being no longer even symbolically to be our children’s haven of rest? How can it be that we who held our children, mentored them, provided for them (as best grass can), will now be held by them?

How can it be that we who held our children, mentored them, provided for them (as best grass can), will now be held by them?

Will I one day be napping in the golden (but also fading) sun of late afternoon because I no longer sleep well nights and my time as grass is nearly gone? And will my daughter come in to wake me up just enough to say good-bye while trying not to ruin my nap? Will I wake up just enough from the fog of sleep to see her dear face, and try to touch her, with a faint smile on my own face, before sleep takes me back? Will she leave my room trying not to cry, as she now lives her time of disbelief that it has come to this even as I am likewise dreaming the same, there in that darkening room?

Yes. Yes, unless some earlier tragedy strikes first, yes. Yes, I will someday need to be held by her as once I held her. I don’t believe it. That’s why I keep saying yes. But yes.

Where in such sorrow is the steadfast love of the Lord? I have enough faith some of the time (but only some of the time, grass that I am) to trust that if it’s everlasting, then it’s there when the grass dies. Then it gathers the grass in its arms once even daughters can no longer hold it.

But God’s steadfast love is also made flesh in family life. All families are grass, all are mortal, so all families manage this only fleetingly. Yet at our best, learning from the one who once pitched his tent among us (as the Gospel of John 1:14 so memorably puts it), we become God’s body to

each other. Our parents' hands holding our fragile baby selves are God's hands. Our own hands holding our parents' fragile aging selves are God's hands. And our commitment to span each other's needs and phases and stages across life's journey from cradle to grave—until you hold me as I once held you—is one way we begin to

teach each other that the love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting.

—*Michael A. King, Telford, Pennsylvania, is publisher, Cascadia Publishing House LLC; editor, DreamSeeker Magazine; and a pastor and speaker.*

There Is a Way

There is a way—
There is always a way.

It may take ten lifetimes.
It may use up a sea of tears,
years spent sitting in the dark,

but the bent wisp of grass
will whisper direction,
a word in the world's thesaurus
will rise from a page,
a fine, sharp blade
will find the space between joints.

There is a way—
There is always a way,

sifting, sifting with an aching back
till the glint of gold takes the eye;
the nudging at a door for
a crack and a ray and the scent of air.

There is a way,
There is always a way,
even the sweep of the mortician's flame,
and the light bright gust upward.

—*Barbara Esch Shisler*

Love Versus God

Joe Postove

Her name was Anne, too. However, Anne Friedman along with her younger sister escaped the Nazi horror. But she lost every other member of her family. Anne made a life in America, married, raised four boys, and is now dying of liver cancer. I grew up next door to her. I believe that she was perhaps the only person who was always glad to see me. I went to see her yesterday.

I was twelve when my older sister killed herself in 1969. I realized then that our two families would be joined at the hip forever. I knew, when my parents returned from the hospital early in the morning, that Toby was dead. I heard the call to brother at college, the cries of utter anguish that at four a.m. would not be stopped by the walls of our house. I heard the dead silence, too.

My mother immediately took to her bed. Dad came into my bedroom, as he normally would on a school day, to wake me. I felt him sit on the bed, even though I was facing the wall and could not see him. He would usually take my foot and tickle me awake, but not today. I turned to face him, and saw someone else; a man suddenly taken dumb, unable to speak. He just looked at me for what seemed like hours rather than

what were probably just seconds. He could not say the words. I think he

Looking out of my window I could see the saddest man in the world just look to her wearily and say, "Toby died."

Dad was rustling the trash cans to the curb when I heard Mrs. Friedman yell from next door "Irving, why aren't you at work? Are you okay?"

Dad never missed work. Looking out of my window I could see the saddest man in the world just look to her wearily and say, "Toby died."

Within minutes Anne was inside our house, the very first one outside the family that day. She brought whatever light one could bring into a house of the deepest darkness. As Jewish tradition requires, she covered all of the mirrors and other reflecting surfaces in the house: Jews are to reflect on their souls, not their faces in these times. She made sure my younger sister and I were fed, as well as Dad.

And she went upstairs to talk to Dottie, my mother, who twenty-seven years before had given birth to her now lost daughter. Anne then proceeded to kickstart the practical things a family must do when one of us dies. She was with us the whole day, as people heard and gathered. And Anne Friedman held our hands, metaphorically, as she ran around our

house, cleaning, cooking, and being the strength that we so sorely needed to somehow begin to steady ourselves.

January 17, 2009

Almost forty years later, this woman cannot leave me now.

When I walked into the sick room, I saw a frail old woman, whose faith in God allowed her to accept the sentence but still insist that she was not ready to die. Around the bed were her people. And a light that focused on a face in gentle repose. Anne was not bargaining. Her eyes were calmly watching God as he tip-toed around the room, wanting her for himself, waiting for his time but being pushed back by the life in Anne's eyes and the love surrounding and protecting her.

God created love. Could it be that he created a force so strong that even he had to stand back now? Had God created something more powerful than himself? It is rather simple. His children, through prayer, and Anne through her awesome strength and love of God's gift of life, were now unwilling to give it back to him, just yet. Humans are the Lord's finest achievement. And Anne and her protectors had, I think, a question for God. Why take from us one of your greatest creations, now, when we need her so much more than you?

I sat by her bed, kissed her, and said "I'm still, everyday, praying for a miracle."

We held hands. Her grip was strong. Indeed she squeezed so tightly that I made a face and made her smile. A weak smile is so much more seductive than a toothy one.

Was Anne saying to God, "Yes, I know," but still fighting, having a conversation with the divinity? As much as she wanted to be in the arms of her mother and father and the scores lost for over six decades, she wanted more time with us. Anne always heeded God. She also needed him to come back later.

Everyone has their "time" we suppose. But sometimes it is the wrong time. God is our timekeeper. But as he silently moved about Anne's room, perhaps it occurred to him that the force of love that he had made and that was now protecting Anne, was more powerful than his timetable. For a moment I thought I saw God fingering his watch fob and stroking his chin, considering whether Anne's death or her life would now be his gift to her.

We held hands, stroked each other for about half an hour yesterday. She would open her eyes and smile. Joey! Oh, Joey. We both smiled and laughed a little. There were many in the house who wanted my chair, but I was not giving it up so easily. God was in the house and could snatch her away at any moment. Besides, she had my hand in her life grip. So strong, I couldn't release her yet.

But eventually I did. I kissed her. I said, "So long, but not goodbye." And another came to sit by her and take her hand.

Several times a day now, I have business with God. I refuse to believe he does not hear me. I know he hears me. I know he listens. When we, the lovers of Anne Friedman, pray for her life,

we must add a codicil. The cancer inside is now killing her. So we add to our prayer for her life, an easy passage, a short trip back to her happiest place . . . before Hitler, before the whole world looked to God and could not find him.

We do want it both ways. We want a miracle too; for God to remove the cancer and return her to us, for a while, the healthy, happy old lady, who was entering old age free of the silliness, doubt, and convention of youth. A 79-year-old woman who still gave lectures on the Holocaust, who bathed in the love of her family, and never shook her fist at God, though he once seemed lost to her. She would love God from her last breath here to her first breath there.

So we wait. And pray. Pray with the fervor of God's six-day creation. Of course Anne will die. Perhaps she has died while I write these words. What a terrible thing it would be to live forever and never move ahead to the place of simple peace and love. The miracle we are asking for is a selfish one. In a world where many point to God and ask, "Who are you," we ask for a few more years of the loving-kindness of Anne Friedman, who never doubted who he is.

So we wait. And pray. Pray with the fervor of God's six-day creation. Of course Anne will die.

*Afterword
January 30, 2009*

Anne died this morning at 3:30. It seems our prayers, our pleas, our en-

treaties to God were ignored. But God doesn't ignore prayer, so that wasn't it. God listens, perhaps deliberates, perhaps not, but we find that, after all, God does not dither. Anne said that she accepted this, but was not ready. We were not ready. But God was ready to take Anne back. And perhaps her death was God's most perfect

act of love for Anne Friedman.

—*Joe Postove, Norfolk, Virginia, is a former talk show host. He has been previously published in Dream-Seeker Magazine (2005). His most important influence in his life and work has been his mother.*



Kansas, My Home

I like the open spaces, the empty places where leaves curl and
cuddle in mounds hidden from gusty gales of south winds
gone north.

I like the blue expansive sky, stretched far and pinned in place by
broomstick trees stitching sky and earth together.

Hedgerows, hallowed reminders of Dust Bowl days, lined up
like squares of patchwork seams hold back waves of dirt.

Corn and wheat flourish, forming endless rows of green carpets
between these hedgerow borders.

Waters, deep-rooted below in the Ogallala Aquifer, we dare not
waste lest we like nesters before, strip earth of its security.

I like summer heat—though not too much—when day arrives
early and stays late, with time for sipping cold tea in be-
tween.

The winter days, so short and bleak inspire baking, puzzle-mak-
ing and letter writing—connecting hearts with far-off
friends.

The seasons roll in rhythms, not too long, sometimes too short
when April snows lay lilacs low or rose buds bloom in
March.

An Ohio child, a Minnesota mom, I've come full bloom in
Kansas.

—*After reading The Worst Hard Time by Timothy Egan about
the Dust Bowl days in western Kansas during the late 1920s
and 1930s, Elizabeth Ann Raid, Newton, Kansas, wrote this
poem. She sees parallel survival themes that flow through the
seasons of her life. Beyond her life in Kansas, she stays connected
to the broader world through her fund-raising work for Men-
nonite Central Committee, an international peace, relief, and
development organization.*



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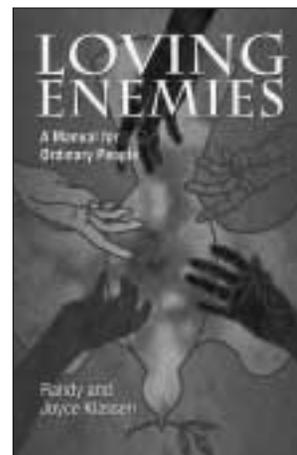
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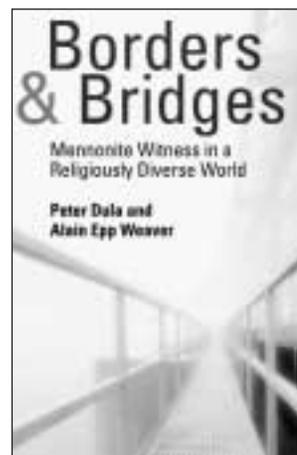


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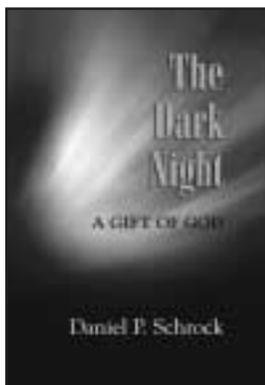
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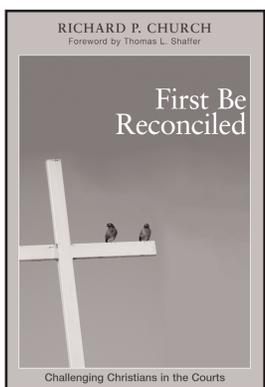
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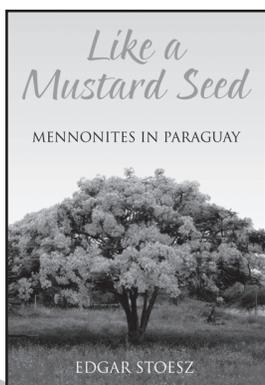
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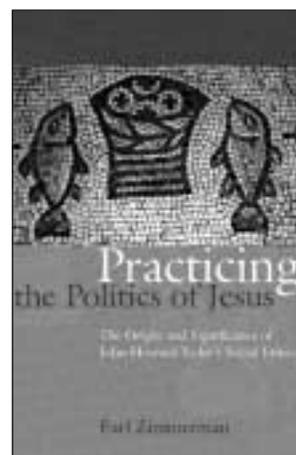
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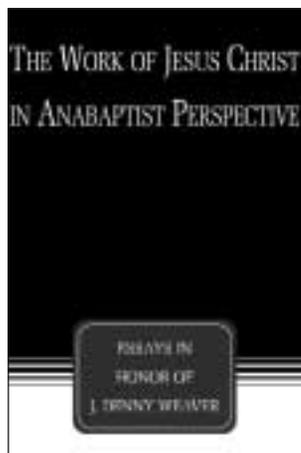


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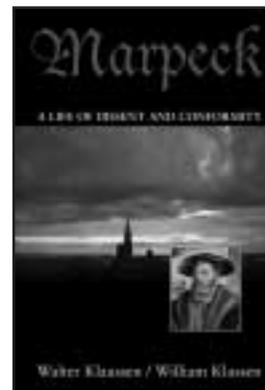
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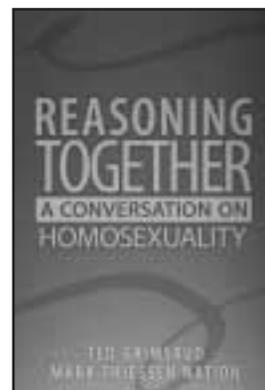


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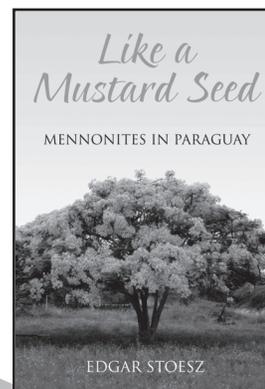
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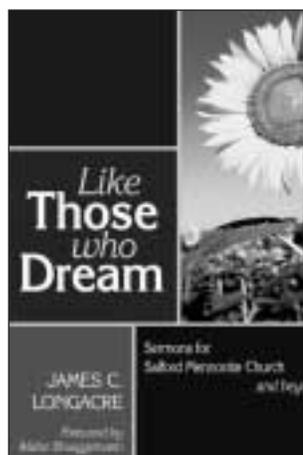
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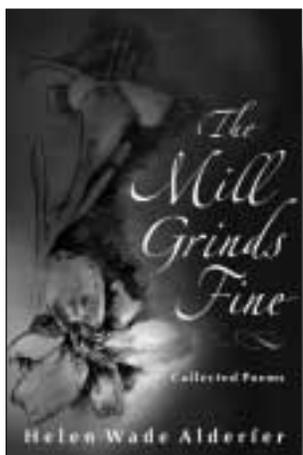
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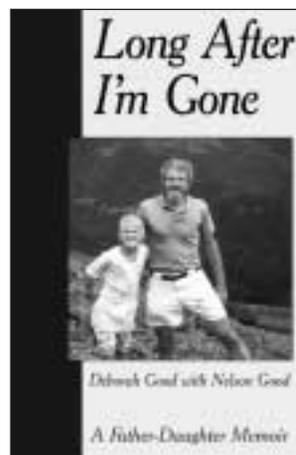
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Longing for Freedom

I woke this morning
from a night of obsessed dreams
longing for freedom.

Life is restraint, constraint,
a tangle of attachments,
dealing out, grabbing back,
trading want and need.
Life is people living together,
holding on, holding in,
watching our step, stepping quick.

Maybe dying, I think as I peel
a banana and pour the milk,
maybe death is the sill to a freedom
so pure we are lifted into a light and
fragrant air, into color inconceivable,
into a new realm of joyful abandon
beyond boundary, let loose together.

I carry my breakfast to the porch
to watch the morning glories open.
Every day they astound my eyes
as I gaze into their perfect blue faces.
This morning a vine has leaped beyond
the top of the trellis and is wandering
back and forth in the empty air
with no place to cling.

*—Barbara Esch Shisler, Telford, Pennsylvania, is a
retired pastor who keeps faith with Frost's com-
ment that poetry provides "a momentary stay
against confusion."*