

DreamSeeker Magazine

Voices from the Soul



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Kingsview

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Licensed to Fish and Afraid to Cast the Line

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Is it Insensitive to Share Your Faith? and Borders and Bridges

Daniel Hertzler

On Footwashing Sunday

Mary Alice Hostetter

Quinceañera by Proxy

Carol Nowlin

Beneath the Skyline

I Don't Need Your Help

Deborah Good

and much more

Winter 2008

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Editorial: Celebrating Faith Treasures

Celebrating the treasures in our own faith journeys. And pondering what to do with conflicting treasures. That seems to me what this issue of *DreamSeeker Magazine* is in many ways about.

The saga begins with Elrena Evans, as she tells of coming to believe, amid questions, that baptism has sealed her baby as God's own. Then I ponder what

to do when Evans' accounting of infant baptism arrives just after I've completed sermons underscoring the importance of adult baptism.

Next Renee Gehman ponders her own riddle: She sees value in evangelizing but a form of it has left her cold. What to do? And Dan Hertzler reviews books that one way or another want to pose the riddle this way: "Is it insensitive to share your faith?"

Then the articles fit the theme less neatly, but I like to think they still engage faith treasures and claims. Take Mary Alice Hostetter. She helps us see both the strangeness of footwashing—why would we want to do this disgusting thing?—and that once she missed a footwashing treasure.

Or take Carol Nowlin. This time Nowlin is not reflecting on a ritual in her own tradition but longing toward the Quinceañera in a distant land. Yet in her longing we glimpse, I suspect, the aches that drive our different ways of seeking and ritualizing something beyond ourselves.

Where I see Deborah Good tying in is in her conviction that in the end

Celebrating the treasures in our own faith journeys. And pondering what to do with conflicting treasures.

none of us can find the Ultimate alone. She quotes Desmond Tutu, "God created us for fellowship," and calls us to live in circles of interdependence. What might it look like to do that even across faith understandings and rituals?

On the surface David Greiser's review of a film steeped in cruelty cuts a different direction. Still it ties in, I believe. "We are, all of us," he says, "a mixture of beauty and evil." And this, I think, makes it hard for us to know when there is evil and when there is good in what we choose to treasure or reject. One more reason to help each other do the discerning—interdependently.

Last, but only because that placement seems to me to empower their contributions, are Valerie Weaver-Zercher and Noël King. Weaver-Zercher appears toward the end because she helps me remember that the goal of pondering faith treasures is not an easy tolerance or "an Unconditional Yes" but learning when to say yes and when to say no to stay on the "path of Life."

And in King's story of Mrs. Smithlebee, whose blood turns out to confer on her eternal life and who gradually concludes this will let her do just about *anything*, I wonder if I hear this: a sly warning that no matter how we handle our own and each other's faith treasures, we'll never grasp all.

—Michael A. King

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Dear Michael King:

I felt that you expressed doubt in such a positive light when you wrote (“Pen and God Go Missing,” *DSM* Autumn 2007),

Whereas many persons of faith seem to experience the gift of seeing easily and naturally why God of course is real, God has given me the gift of seeing easily and naturally why of course some people find it hard to believe God is real.

I have been puzzling with various sorts of epistemological questions for many years, and this may be the most positive perspective I have yet found. Perhaps I cannot put two and two together, or perhaps I simply refuse to believe the obvious as I have been told from time to time. Yet somehow a person who struggles with doubt and faith is how God seems to have made me—and perhaps that is a gift after all.

Thanks for the perspective.

—Kevin Glick, Portland, Oregon

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

Me and My House

Elena Evans

Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve. . . . But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.

—Joshua 24:15

I am standing in the narthex at the back of the church, rocking slowly from side to side, balancing on the balls of my feet as I rock. In my arms I hold several yards of white organza, embroidered with shamrocks and trimmed with lace. And in the middle of all the fabric, swaying gently in my arms, my not-quite-eight-week-old daughter is sleeping.

In moments my husband and I will stand in front of the congregation, flanked by grandparents, godparents, and friends, and make lifelong promises on her behalf. We will promise to raise her in the Christian faith and tradition, promise to help her grow to love the Lord. We will listen as the priest pronounces words over her head, words so rich they shimmer with tradition and with promises Christians have been making for millennia. All this for a little girl so tiny and new I still have trouble believing she is here to stay.

I’ve made a lot of promises in this church, standing under the soaring roof of the sanctuary that is built, inexplicably, in the shape of an upside-down ark. Baptized as an older child, I stood up in this church and

promised to follow Jesus Christ and obey him as my Lord, shivering as the cold water trickled down my skin.

At my confirmation, I knelt in front of the bishop and pledged to uphold that baptismal covenant, while the hard stone altar made dents in my knees. And over a year ago, I processed up the long, candlelit aisle dressed in yards of white, and vowed in God's name to love and cherish my husband until death do us part.

I've stood and watched as countless parents have brought their children to this baptismal font, and I've promised to support them in their commitments. I've made many promises here for myself but never before on behalf of someone else.

Will you be responsible for seeing that the child you present is brought up in the Christian faith and love?

I will, with God's help.

My daughter squirms in my arms, now awake. Around her fat baby neck she wears a golden cross, the twin of the cross I was given on the day I was baptized. We stand before the priest in our matching crosses, and I reflect as I look at her that I don't yet know where I end and she begins.

Will you by your prayers and witness help this child grow into the full stature of Christ?

I will, with God's help.

I know these words by heart, having memorized them for my own baptism, and I speak my responses clearly without a glance at the Book of Common Prayer my husband holds open before us. This memorization is a point of pride—not a Christian virtue, but true nonetheless.

The service continues as a series of questions, asked by the priest and answered by parents, godparents, and friends. I close my eyes and let the familiar liturgy wash over me.

As I hand my daughter to the priest—a delicate transfer, given the swaths of slippery fabric—I think about the promises we are making for her. I think about my own place in the tradition of our faith.

My life resembles this liturgy of baptism, in that it often seems like a series of questions. Unlike the liturgy, however, I don't have all the answers neatly printed out in a book I can follow. The Book I turn to for answers is often enigmatic, written in the language of parable and story, tending to conceal as much as it reveals.

When I was preparing for baptism and confirmation, I asked my priest innumerable questions—weighty questions about the nature of God, lighter questions about the Eternal Candle in the sanctuary and who relights it when eventually it goes out. Finding myself alone in the church one day, I climbed up on a tall pedestal designed to hold flower arrangements so I could see the mysterious candle myself, disappointed when all I saw was ordinary wax and flame.

At baptism, the presiding priest prays for the newly baptized: *Give them an inquiring and discerning heart.* I don't know about discerning, but I seem to have the inquiring part—so much so that, when these words were said over my newly baptized head, I snuck a look at the priest

who conducted my preparatory class and saw him shake his head and roll his eyes to heaven. *Dear God,* he seemed to say, *this one certainly doesn't need to be any more inquiring.*

But if I thought I would have all the answers, would fully understand the mysteries of faith when I bent my head under the water of baptism, I was disappointed just as surely as I was disappointed to discover that the Eternal Candle was simply wax. By the time I knelt before the bishop at confirmation, I was slowly beginning to realize that study wasn't the answer; even seminary wouldn't be the answer. My questions were not going away.

I talked to my mother about faith and uncertainty. "You don't have to know all the answers," she told me. "You just have to believe." It was what I had expected her to say. "But that doesn't mean you stop asking the questions," she said, her brown eyes holding mine intently. I hadn't expected her to say that. "Take them to the Lord," she continued. "Make them a part of your journey."

I thought about what my mother had said. Maybe faith wasn't something to be attained once I had all the answers. Maybe faith meant acknowledging something bigger than myself, beyond myself: saying *I am not all that there is*—a humbling statement for someone accustomed to relying on her own abilities, her own mind. Maybe faith meant trusting in something I couldn't verify, couldn't prove—hence, faith.

If I couldn't find answers to all of my questions, perhaps the two, the faith and the questions, could coexist side by side. Not despite but because of each other.

Like most of my great life revelations, the thrill of discovery was slightly diluted by the realization that I was not, in fact, the first person to ever have such an epiphany.

It is this exact relationship between faith and questions that the father of an ailing child discovers in one of the gospel stories, when he cries out to Jesus: "I do believe; help my unbelief." It is this symbiotic pairing of belief and uncertainty

that singer/songwriter Michael Card refers to when he asks, "Could it be the questions tell us more than answers ever do?"

And it is this complicated mixture that I ultimately chose to embrace, with a conscious decision not to stop asking, but to believe through the questions. Faith and doubt, coexisting, side by side. Faith to make an active, conscious choice to ask questions—hard ones—and still believe.

My daughter is held over the baptismal font, and water pours over her head as she is baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. I read a story once that said in the Middle Ages, superstitious Christians wanted their children to cry at baptism, as proof that the devil was being driven out of their souls. If the superstition has any basis in reality,

Maybe faith meant trusting in something I couldn't verify, couldn't prove—hence, faith.

the devil was fully and completely kicked out of my daughter.

She howls as the water meets her skin, and although I know it is a howl of hunger for milk and for mama, I'm tempted to imagine that it also holds a primeval cry of frustration in its depths—a cry for all that we long to understand, and for all that we never, on this side of eternity, will.

I wish the faith I am passing down to her wasn't so fraught; I wish the tears she sheds at her baptism could be her last. As she sobs, the priest makes the sign of the cross on her forehead: *You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own for ever.*

Forever. She is handed back to me, and I cradle her to my chest as we recess down the long aisle, back into the narthex where we cuddle and nurse and, for the moment, she has everything she needs.

As she grows in the faith she will doubt, and she will question; but she is sealed as God's own. And I choose to trust that as she asks the questions, her

faith—the faith we pass on to her—will sustain her every step of the way as it becomes her very own.

“Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve,” the book of Joshua admonishes. “But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” I like this declaration of conscious choice. This is the faith of my mothers, yes, but this is also *my* faith, a faith I have chosen to make my own. A faith I pray my daughter will someday choose as well.

I will never have all the answers. But this I know: as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.

—*Elrena Evans lives with her family in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania. She is co-editor of Mama, PhD: Women Write about Motherhood and Academic Life (Rutgers, 2008). She writes about the intersections of faith and parenting in the monthly column “Me and My House” for Literary Mama, where this article first appeared.*



Infant Baptism Friday After Adult Baptism Sunday: A Riddle

Michael A. King

Before a smile seemed to spread across my life from somewhere, maybe even an impish Spirit, that Sunday I wrapped up the series of seven sermons on key Anabaptist-Mennonite teachings our associate pastor and I had been preaching. Amid an influx of new members largely from backgrounds other than Mennonite, those of us in congregational leadership had settled on this approach as a way to emphasize basic teachings and test whether we were within reach of consensus on core values.

Throughout the series, I made much of adult baptism. I recounted how in early 1500s Europe arose the conviction that the decision to follow Christ was one to be made by persons old enough to understand and count the cost. I distinguished between Christendom and believers church understandings of Christianity. In Christendom, as some would name the collection of Christianized nations of 1500s Europe, the very act of being born into and then baptized as a baby into a

nearly seamless interweaving of church and nation makes you a Christian.

In a believers church, you become Christian by consciously choosing to follow Christ. You then mark your decision publicly by baptism amid the believers you now knowingly and intentionally join.

In Christendom, I noted, there is considerable risk that nation and society will take priority over Jesus' teachings. This is because Christendom can make it seem as if whatever your nation or culture wants is also what Jesus wants.

In a believers church tradition such as espoused by the Anabaptists, including the Mennonite branch which took its name from Menno Simons, Dutch priest turned Anabaptist, the first loyalty is to God's nation. Its citizens are believers committed to living above all by God's laws particularly as taught by Jesus rather than according to human laws. If the demands of citizenship in God's nation clash with the demands of one's earthly nation, in a believers church understanding one chooses God over local loyalties.

And the core sign of this view is adult or believers baptism. The early Anabaptists felt compelled to mark their break from Christendom nations in favor of God's nation by rebaptizing each other. Then it would be unmistakably clear, to them and to those surrounding them: Christ over nation.

Understandably Christendom recoiled. These Anabaptists declaring their higher loyalties risked destroy-

ing Christendom. So the Anabaptists, meaning "rebaptizers," were told to recant or else. Thousands remained unbowed. They had declared their loyalty to God through Christ. They had meant it, they had counted the cost, they would pay any price. And so, unrepentant, they accepted torture, drownings, burnings at stakes.

They have something to teach us, I suggested, even today, maybe especially today, as Christendom seems at times to be reviving. Even contemporary democracies whose constitutional commitment is to distinguish between church and state seem increasingly tempted to find salvation in the hope that if church again becomes state and state becomes church, then God will bless. But history suggests that when state and church become each other, church loses. God loses. Faithfulness to Christ's more radical teachings fades or is even actively stamped out.

So let us be believers church and not Christendom members, I preached. And let us treasure believers baptism as the mark of our decision.

That was Sunday. For a few days I enjoyed a feeling of completion. I felt renewed commitment to Anabaptist-Mennonite understandings. Then came Friday and Elrena Evans.

She was querying my interest in publishing "Me and My House" (now in this Winter 2008 issue of *DreamSeeker Magazine*). I started in with the inevitably skeptical attitude of an editor forced to reject some 90 percent of submissions because they don't fit the magazine. Then I realized here was

trouble. Here was writing so skillful and moving that as never before in my life I could get, as if from the inside, why one might see the baptism of an infant as an event to treasure rather than reject, a celebration to honor rather than to die opposing.

Still I wanted to reject. How to square this with the passions I had just invested in that preaching series?

Finally I said to Evans that although the hoped-for audience is broader than Mennonite, "*DreamSeeker Magazine* emerges from an Anabaptist-Mennonite publisher. . . . And as you also may be aware, Anabaptists got burned at the stake and drowned in 1500s Europe for rebaptizing themselves (the name *Anabaptism* means rebaptizer and was given them by their enemies) for their belief that Jesus taught baptism for adults. Thus was born the adult baptism/believers church tradition.

"It just so happens," I continued, "that I'm pastor of an Anabaptist-Mennonite congregation among whom are many newer participants who have mixed feelings about Anabaptist-Mennonite teachings—including adult baptism." I reported that having just completed a sermon series on these teachings was causing me to ponder "how we retain a core Mennonite identity yet honor perspectives of those shaped in different traditions.

"Now here," I observed, "comes your article on baptism of your baby daughter! Interesting the ways of the

"Now here," I observed, "comes your article on baptism of your baby daughter! Interesting the ways of the Spirit."

Spirit." I noted how movingly the narrative fit the *DreamSeeker Magazine* quest for "voices from the soul," which made it hard indeed to turn down. I suggested accepting the story for publication then possibly "writing something myself on the intrigue of publishing this celebration of infant baptism in a magazine emerging from an adult-baptism tradition."

We agreed. This was a way to proceed. So now we have. Evans speaks in these pages. As do I. We speak so differently. We reflect ways of thinking

each so convinced of being the Truth that our forebears thought death—whether imposing or accepting it—was better than compromise.

Why resist still fighting each other, if not to physical death in our occasionally more civilized times, at least until one or the other emerges the spiritual victor? Evans, who had in fact understood that *DreamSeeker Magazine* emerges from an Anabaptist tradition valuing believers baptism, had realized battle was a possibility when she submitted the article. She wouldn't have been surprised to receive a summary rejection.

But I found I had in this case no stomach for battle, not even for just the first shot of rejection. It was one thing to champion believers baptism in my own congregation. It was another thing to deny Evans her story and its treasures any more than I'd accept her denying my story and its treasures.

But what alternative to fighting is there? Surely one of us is wrong? Then I remember that Evans says this: “My life resembles this liturgy of baptism, in that it often seems like a series of questions.” This sounds familiar, I think. This sounds like . . . me.

Yes, I embrace the value and meaning of believers baptism. But I too have found that life is a series of questions. Even in my own congregation, after the sermon series ended, I’ve wrestled with how to journey with those from infant baptism traditions who are saying that yes, they get why Anabaptist-Mennonites underscore adult baptism. But no, they’re not so sure this means their own infant baptism, followed by confirmation rites in which they claimed the meaning of what they once were too young to understand, must be superseded by rebaptism. Would I feel any

differently if I were they? Probably not. Now what?

I don’t want to make this an answer column. I’m not sure enough of what we do next when faced with your treasure being my lump of coal or vice-versa. But as tensions within and between faith traditions seem ever to be mounting these days, finding alternatives to battle seems ever more important. So I want to benefit from wrestling with this riddle the Spirit seems to have handed me: How do I treasure my own understandings of baptism and simultaneously see treasure in that soulful story of coming to believe that through baptism a daughter “is sealed as God’s own”?

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



Licensed to Fish and Afraid to Cast the Line

Renee Gehman

In a taxi cab in June my host sister, actress at heart, crossed herself as she’d seen a Catholic do in an HBO movie. “Why do the people do that?” she asked me

This is how I came to explain the Trinity to a nine-year-old Vietnamese girl with two years of English and a family history of Buddhism and ancestor worship. On Easter, I hid a basket of candy and confused her further with my note introducing her to a holiday of bunnies, candy, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

With these happenings from my year-long term with Mennonite Central Committee in Vietnam concludes my experience evangelizing.

I’ve aimed for my Christian faith to look something like this: believe in the gospel message; love the Lord with heart, soul, and mind; and love my neighbor as myself. It’s seemed to me to encompass the basics, because if I’m walking on a foundation of faith in the direction of love, the rest should theoretically follow, right?

A glitch in this system is that I am constantly falling off the road and getting lost—often enough

that the rest has not just followed. Exhibit A: my lifelong overlooking of the great commission. It is an absurd thing indeed to read all of a book save the last paragraph, and the Gospel of Matthew is no exception. That, however, is what it appears I have done, so let us just review the words in red before proceeding:

“Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” (Matt. 28:19)

When I learned that my Sunday school class would be studying evangelism this quarter, I was thrilled to hear more about what I see as a relevant and urgent issue on both a personal and communal level. It was arranged that two men from another church in the conference would lead our class, teaching with materials from “The Way of the Master,” an evangelism training ministry headed by 1980s actor Kirk Cameron and evangelist Ray Comfort.

In the course DVDs, Cameron and Comfort hit the streets, approaching strangers and using the Ten Commandments to get them to admit they are sinners and, by implication, deserving hell and needing God’s forgiveness. By targeting the human conscience, they try to plant in people seeds of guilt and a sense of urgency to remedy the situation with repentance, so as to become fit for heaven. When Cameron and Com-

fort are not on the streets, the DVDs portray them explaining their methodology to the viewer, sometimes while animated graphics of flames burn in the background.

Our class discussed beforehand that the material might feel unsettling and maybe even offensive, and for many of us, it did indeed. The “Way of the Master” felt like a collection of scare tactics, or arrogant and manipulative.

We tried to keep open minds, asking questions and sitting through the DVDs. But as our leaders began to raise voices, cut off classmates mid-comment, or avoid answering our questions directly, discomfort grew and soured into anger and frustration. Anger was directed now toward not only the program but also the leaders, and it began to push minds closed, as anger tends to do.

Frustration became visible in the leaders as well, as it does in any of us unable to convince others of what we feel most passionate about. As one who shrinks under raised voices, I began to walk to Sunday school like a misbehaving child to a stern-faced parent waiting with arms crossed and disapproving eyes bearing down.

When our class discussed what positive aspects we could draw from the lessons and our leaders, we admitted they have admirable courage, they exhibit strong commitment to study the Bible, and they have a burning passion for their ministry—areas many of us would admit we fall short in.

As for the program, though, many of us just could not accept the

methodology. “What about my Vietnamese host family?” I wanted to ask (and should have, yes.) “They’ve practiced Buddhism and ancestor worship for generations! There’s no way I could use the Ten Commandments to get them to admit they are sinners deserving of hell without doing more damage than good!” All around the classroom, people were essentially saying, *I’m just not comfortable doing it that way.*

What I’ve been compelled to admit, however, as we near our last session, is this: I’m just not comfortable doing it, *period.* Questions of methodology aside, I am not sharing my faith with anyone except other Christians. I am sitting in a boat staring blankly at a tackle box, pondering over what bait to use, where to drop my line, stalling with thoughts of whether today’s atmospheric pressure is even suitable for fishing or whether I should upgrade to a better rod before I even start. Essentially I am afraid of what might happen if I just take that risk of casting my line.

Mennonites are generally not great at sharing our faith with nonbelievers. We are great at service, pursuing peace and social justice, and from my experience with MCC I would say we are great at being culturally sensitive. But when it comes to preaching the gospel, or even just verbally sharing our faith, there is room and urgency for improvement.

I’ve heard it said before that Mennonites “walk the talk” but don’t “talk the walk.” A member of my Sunday

school class illustrated this last week when he recalled a recent MDS trip, “We went down to build someone a house, we were there for a whole week, and not once did we tell them why we were there! Not once did I tell them about my faith!”

Most versions of the Bible include a disputed ending to the gospel of Mark, even though its questionable authenticity is noted, saying something like “The earliest manuscripts and some other ancient witnesses do not have Mark 16:9-20.” Vocabulary, style, and theological content unlike the rest of Mark make this ending seem

even less authentic. So why does it even remain in place?

I don’t have the answer, but the questionable ending is similar to Matthew’s, sending the disciples out to preach the good news to all of creation. Mark 16:8, however, which is considered the original ending, comes abruptly after the three women saw the empty tomb: “Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.” Not quite as uplifting as the great commission speech!

Mark’s is known as the Gospel that emphasizes the absolute failing of Jesus’ innermost circle, so it would make sense for his account to end with such a failing as these fearful women who keep silent. But perhaps we cling to that great commission ending because we know that in this life we are not called to end our story

I am not sharing my faith with anyone except other Christians.

silent and afraid, nor should we allow it to happen.

I myself don't understand enough about faith to explain it all to someone. I will never be fully equipped with the answers, nor will I be spiritually mature enough to serve as an exceptional example of a Christian for someone. But what if I said I'm through with being that woman who kept silent in fear—and became one who did what Jesus said to do? What if I stopped nitpicking about less-than-perfect circumstances for preaching the good news and actually opened my mouth?

True, my host sister didn't con-

vert; she probably didn't even understand or really care about what I said. But she gave me a small taste of this fishing that I have been called to do, and it tasted good. So why does it continue to be so very difficult for me to get my line out in that water?

—*Renee Gehman, Souderton, Pennsylvania, is assistant editor, Dream-Seeker Magazine, and an aspiring fisher. She finds it interesting that Vietnamese often give their children nicknames to be used at home, to confuse evil spirits, and her host sister's happens to translate as "little fish."*



A Time for Renewal—Again

Reviews of Road Signs for the Journey, Is It Insensitive to Share Your Faith? and Borders and Bridges

Daniel Hertzler

Road Signs for the Journey: A Profile of Mennonite Church USA, by Conrad Kanagy. Herald Press, 2007.

Is It Insensitive to Share Your Faith? Hard Questions About Christian Mission in a Plural World, by James R. Krabill. Good Books, 2005.

Borders and Bridges: Mennonite Witness in a Religiously Diverse World, edited by Peter Dula and Alain Epp Weaver. Cascadia Publishing House, 2007.

These three books do not exactly belong together, but they have a common concern: How may the good news of Jesus Christ be made known, particularly as interpreted by Mennonites? Each book comes at the question in a different way. The first describes how as a church we're not what we ought to be. The second reflects on the message from a "missional" (outreach-focused) perspective, and the third describes how some persons have been doing it. Let me confess. I think I

want to include the second and the third in some way to respond to the charges of the first.

Some historical background may be useful. From 1984 to 1996 Herald Press published four volumes as “The Mennonite Experience in America” series covering Mennonite history from 1683 to 1970. The story these books tell is of a people marginalized by their faith and not always successful in shaping a lifestyle of following Jesus.

Richard MacMaster’s first volume ends with a quotation from a Methodist pastor who “said of Mennonites and Dunkers that they had a ‘scheme of discipline’ that was divisive to the social order; it clashed, he said, ‘with the common methods of government and civil society,’” but he found that “They were ‘remarkably peaceful and passive’ and being so, they were ‘readily tolerated and excused’” (*Land, Piety, Peoplehood*, 287).

Throughout the series Mennonites and Amish are found bumping against the assumptions of “government and civil society,” especially in times of war. But at the end of volume 4, Paul Toews is hopeful. He notes that between 1930 and 1970 there were contrasting methods of dealing with societal pressures. One was that of the Old Orders who “have worked hardest at preserving the spatial folk communities.” On the other hand, “Progressive Mennonites have worked more at preserving community via new denominational structures, ideological formulas, and ecumenical alliances.” He concludes

that “Into the 1970s both strategies worked.” (*Mennonites in American Society, 1930–1970*, 342).

In the meantime Mennonite sociologists began to survey Mennonite churches to see whether modern Mennonites reflect the convictions of their Anabaptist predecessors. Two studies of five Mennonite groups appeared: *Anabaptism Four Centuries Later*, by J. Howard Kauffman and Leland Harder (Herald Press, 1975) and *The Mennonite Mosaic* by J. Howard Kauffman and Leo Driedger (Herald Press, 1991).

The first volume concluded with a list of four “Unresolved Tensions” and the observation that “The impact of a secular order is always threatening to religious pluralism” (342). In the second the authors concluded that “Theological pluralism is very much a part of the Mennonite Mosaic” (271).

Road Signs for the Journey follows these two studies but is not quite the same. Since the publishing of *The Mennonite Mosaic*, two of the five Mennonite denominations surveyed have merged but then re-divided into Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada. Kanagy’s study is of Mennonite Church USA. While the directors of the earlier studies were sociologist-churchmen, Kanagy is a sociologist-pastor, who delves into the book of Jeremiah as commentary on his report.

So, on the one hand, as a sociologist he finds deterioration in our Mennonite identity. On the other hand, like a revivalist he exhorts us to respond to the charges and get on with our work to become “missional”

churches. Another difference from the earlier studies is that Kanagy has arranged for a special sample from Racial/Ethnic Mennonite churches so members of these congregations may be adequately represented. In certain respects he finds these members representing our calling better than those of us in the dominant Caucasian culture.

The study is interpreted within the context of the Protestant church in the United States, which is found to be “A Church in Crisis.” Kanagy observes that evangelicals on the one hand “too often embrace a ‘God and country’ civil religion that diminishes the transformative power of the gospel, while Protestant mainliners emphasize the need for social justice without addressing personal salvation and individual transformation through Jesus Christ” (26).

As for Mennonites, “Our difficulty in managing the politics of these culture wars has silenced our unique and historic witness as a people of God who—in word and deed—proclaim the gospel’s power to transform both structures and individuals” (27). This is Kanagy’s thesis and the rest of the book serves to illustrate it.

He makes regular use of the message of Jeremiah as a source for his exhortation that we need to respond to the task that is before us. At the conclusion of chapter 8, which uses the Jewish Babylonian exile as a theme, he wonders “if we shouldn’t be doing two things at once: connecting to the

broader culture while at the same time spiritually discerning what distinguishes us from that culture” (174).

Among the findings which concern him is that our church is getting older. In the 1970 survey, 54 percent of Mennonites were in the category

Of more concern is erosion in our convictions about the kingdom of God as related to the kingdoms of this world.

18 to 45. By 1989 this had dropped to 45 percent and in this most recent survey to 30 percent. Also, the church has gotten smaller. In 1989 the two denominations which now make up Mennonite Church USA totaled 130,329 members. Today we are 109,000. Of course it may be noted that

in a number of cases this involved congregations discontinuing membership in district conferences at least in part because of uneasiness with the merger of the two denominations.

Of more concern is erosion in our convictions about the kingdom of God as related to the kingdoms of this world. Although 71 percent believe that war is wrong and 93 percent see peacemaking as “a central theme of the gospel” other opinions do not seem to support these convictions. “Almost half of Mennonites (48 percent) believe that America is a Christian nation; 67 percent would pledge allegiance to the flag, and more than one-third (35 percent) believe it is okay to fly an American flag inside a Mennonite church. Nearly 25 percent support the war in Iraq, and 42 percent believe that the ‘war on terror’ is a religious battle” (128).

Kanagy’s response to the decline in numbers is for us to be more evan-

gelistic. In this too he finds us lacking, although the racial/ethnic members are better at this. He lays out a prescription for success: “if local congregations increasingly reflect God’s reign, such changes will bring new members who will have more questions rather than fewer about what it means to be Anabaptist” (193).

My local church experience models in some respects the pattern described by Kanagy. Mennonites came to Westmoreland and Fayette Counties at the end of the eighteenth century. By the mid-nineteenth they were in decline but at the beginning of the twentieth began to revive.

Bible teaching in Sunday schools was the method of extension while the organization of Mennonite Publishing House in 1908 gave the church wider connections. Sunday schools evolved into congregations, and by 1960 there were three congregations. Then termites took one of the buildings and the two former Sunday schools united.

At the end of the twentieth century, migration out of the area and the demise of Mennonite Publishing House pressed down upon the two remaining congregations, and in 2003 they merged. Now on a good Sunday the merged congregation fills one meeting place with perhaps some in the balcony.

Having weathered the storms of merger we look ahead and ask what our evangelistic ministry should be in the years ahead. It will evidently not be Sunday school which once filled schoolhouses. We’re looking for the

contexts in which to share our faith, and we expect to find them.

Now to the other two books. Krabill’s is more or less a memoir. He tells stories about his experience as a missionary Bible teacher in the Ivory Coast of Africa and ponders the meaning of the gospel in that context as well as anywhere else in the world in our time. He ruminates about the message and proposes that “The earthly life of Jesus, his ministry, death, resurrection, and return to heaven together constitute the single most important event of all time, the event by which history is divided and all other events are defined and understood” (26).

From here on he raises questions implied in the subtitle: the meaning of Jesus, the ridiculous character of the church, the contrasting messages of the Bible and the newspaper. Chapter 7 describes the background of the church in Ivory Coast for which he had been a Bible teacher. It was started by William Wade Harris, who had only 18 months to work before he was expelled from the country. But in that short time he was able to found a church.

Krabill goes on to comment on how the worldwide population of the church is moving south. He observes that “Our greatest challenge as undeserving recipients of God’s peacemaking initiative is to get ourselves up to speed with what God has already been doing in the many millennia before our arrival. And then” he concludes, “we must determine through prayer and discernment, in what ways we

might participate in God’s local efforts already well underway” (141).

The message is in line with Krabill’s role as “Senior Executive for Global Ministries at Mennonite Mission Network.” At the end of the book he mentions a possible new frontier for the worldwide mission of the church. There is, he says, “a vision among Chinese Christians to send 100,000 missionaries ‘back to Jerusalem’ in the next 10 years” (143).

The idea is that the gospel began at Jerusalem and now they propose to take it back to where it began. If such a vision is carried out one can scarcely imagine how the Israelis and even the local Christians might respond.

The third book, *Borders and Bridges*, provides its own answers to questions raised by the first two. The subtitle identifies the message, and each chapter provides a variation on the theme. James Krabill has asked, *Is it insensitive to share your faith?* The message of this book is that interfaith contacts are delicate and may be open to misunderstanding, but yes—it is possible to share the faith.

The context for the origination of material in the book was a 2004 meeting of Mennonite Central Committee’s Peace Committee “who first offered feedback on initial versions of portions of this volume” (10). The editors are both former MCC administrators, and all but one of the chapters grow out of MCC activities. One can imagine that an organization which

does relief and development “In the Name of Christ” may be pressed on occasion to say whether its work is “evangelistic enough.” This book provides its own sort of answer.

The answer is that the faith may be shared—if it is done sensitively. As Alain Epp Weaver observes in the introduction, “Interfaith bridge building is not about adherents of different faiths relinquishing their truth claims . . . or about watering down religious convictions to a lowest

common denominator. For Christians,” Weaver underscores, “interfaith bridge building is motivated by the confession that Jesus Christ is Lord over all creation and history” (14).

Chapter 1 reports on activities in Indonesia where Paulus, an Indonesian Christian, was able to relate to Agus, an Indonesian Muslim. Agus said, “If I had only known you and associated with Christians like I am doing now, I would not have needed to lose 50 of my soldiers who were killed in Ambon and Poso. I regret killing Christians” (20).

Some chapters report interaction with Catholics and members of other Christian traditions. Among them is Edgar Metzler’s report on the experience of the United Mission to Nepal, where Mennonites have joined forces with other Christians. When the program began, Nepal was officially Hindu—no other religion was legal.

As time has gone on, Nepal has opened somewhat, so there are now Nepali Christians with whom pro-

The answer is that the faith may be shared—if it is done sensitively.

gram directors can relate. Metzler concludes that it has been possible to build bridges to persons of another faith without giving up faith in Jesus. He cites three MCC Peace Committee guidelines of which the third is “Desire . . . everyone to come to see their lives in light of the gracious judgment of the cross, so that we may grow together into the future community that Jesus made possible” (88).

In the final chapter Peter Dula proposes “A Theology for Interfaith Bridge Building.” Drawing on Karl Barth, he outlines a position he sees as avoiding the pitfalls of pluralism, inclusivism, and exclusivism. He says that on the one hand are liberals who see all religions as essentially the same and on the other conservatives who insist that “Outside of, say, Christianity, there can be no truth” (162).

Following Barth, Dula says that although we agree that Jesus is the light, other lights should be recognized for what they can show Christians about their own failure to take the light seriously. In the end, he reports that of “the new truths” discovered by MCC workers, “the most frequently returning theme is relationships” (168).

But, of course, MCC is not building churches. Yet in holding up Christ as the light while recognizing other lights, Dula suggests an approach for all who wish to cherish the church and extend its borders. Is this too sophisticated a formula for us to use in our local churches? I hope not.

—*Daniel Hertzler, Scottdale, Pennsylvania, is chair of the elders, Scottdale Mennonite Church.*



On Footwashing Sunday

Mary Alice Hostetter

When I was thirteen, my parents were called, they said, to a remote mission outpost of our Mennonite congregation. It was off in the mountains, a small gray-shingled church on a treeless hilltop. It was almost an hour's drive to get there, past carefully painted barns and fertile fields and pastures, flower and vegetable gardens, then up the mountain and past fallen-down shacks, rusted trailers, and yards littered with discarded appliances and car parts.

My parents were called, they said, to bring Jesus to these people, to show them his love. We, their children, went along, Sunday after Sunday, to worship with people who in every other area of our lives we avoided.

Every few months, on Communion Sunday, we had footwashing. It was a sacrament whose symbolic significance was perhaps lost on some adolescents, and I was one of them. I knew that Jesus had washed his disciples' feet and instructed them and all of his followers to go by his example. Nevertheless, I dreaded footwashing Sunday.

As always, the women sat on one side, the men on the other. On footwashing Sunday I tried to choose

my seat carefully to avoid the feet I did not want to wash, but that made little difference. There was no predicting who the bishop's wife might pair me with as she went down the rows of women, quietly directing who should go next into the back room where coats were hung, where two white basins sat on the floor in front of a wooden bench, a stack of white towels in the corner.

When I was thirteen, the feet I most wanted to avoid were Sarah's. It seemed to me the bishop's wife must have known that and paired me with her far too often, as if God were giving me some special challenge.

Sarah was an older, almost-blind woman, who smelled of coal oil and too-few baths. At the direction of the bishop's wife, who touched her arm and helped her up, Sarah shuffled into the back room, and the bishop's wife signaled for me to follow, which I did. Feeling for the end of the bench in the back room, Sarah sat down. With shaking hands, she unlaced her shoes, peeled down her stockings.

I knelt and slid the basin of water under her feet. I tried not to look at the lumpy bunions, the calluses, the black toenails. Taking one foot at a time, I splashed the water over and around, being careful not to touch

her. I picked up a towel and dried her feet quickly, not gently as the bishop's wife had done the time she washed my feet. She had wrapped the towel around, caressing my foot, drying each toe around and between.

When I finished hurriedly splashing the water over her feet, I stood and said, "God bless you, Sarah," as we were supposed to, but I did not embrace her. Because Sarah could not bend down or see to wash my feet, I did not take off my shoes and stockings but hurried back to where I'd been sitting, leaving Sarah to struggle, pulling on her stockings over still-damp feet, standing up and feeling her way back to her bench.

I might have tried to soothe Sarah's feet, to help her with her stockings. I might have helped her up and led her to her seat. I might have said, "God bless you, sister," and meant it. But I didn't.

—*Mary Alice Hostetter, Charlottesville, Virginia, after a career in teaching and human services, has now chosen to devote more time to her lifelong passion for writing. Among the themes she has explored are reflections on growing up Mennonite in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, during the 1950s and 1960s.*

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Quinceañera by Proxy

Carol Nowlin

I am sitting cross-legged in the basement, my bottom numb from the cold. Around me are the perfectly arranged folds of the Quinceañera dress my cousin Jeanette gave us. The taffeta flares out across the concrete floor. This dress, more than anything, makes me feel beautiful. When I am sitting like this, with the frothy pink taffeta splayed out neatly in a circle, I am perfect.

I touch the ruffles at my neck and dream I am Pocahontas, the Indian princess. Or a blonde damsel waiting for a knight to free her from the dragon's lair. In the damp stillness I turn my head and listen for the sound of horse's hooves clattering down our staircase.

Instead I hear my mother moving about in the kitchen above me. Then there is the heavy tread of my dad's shoes and the sound of the TV in the living room. *They don't even notice I'm gone*, I think. This dry-walled room on the side of the basement is where I come to try on the Quinceañera dress. It hangs in a closet on a wire hanger, a smooth rush of pink against the basement's gloom. Despite the rust spots, rips, and sprinkles of mold, my stomach wallops every time I catch sight of it.

I smooth a wrinkle and turn toward the door. "Hello Prince Charming," I say, and tilt my head. Just then I hear footsteps on the stairs. I jump up, grabbing handfuls of the taffeta skirt, and face the door. My father walks past the doorway, his tool belt clanking with each step. He catches sight of me and stops, his face shadowed in the half-light. We make eye contact, then he turns and walks over to his tool bench.

I wait until I hear the tread of his feet on the steps once again. Then I pull the dress over my head, lace scratching my cheeks. I put it on its wire hanger and tug back into my T-shirt and culottes.

I knew there was no prince. Yet I kept sneaking down to the basement, sometimes just to stroke the dress, sometimes to pull it over my head and sit down, letting it puff around me and feeling the cool floor on my legs.

While I sat there I imagined Jeanette's Quinceañera in Mexico, where her family lived as Mennonite missionaries. Her dad Raul was Latino, so I imagined Jeanette's dark hair arranged around her shoulders, her greenish eyes (my aunt's color) glowing out from her dusky skin. The pale pink sleeves making her arms look even darker. It was her Big Day. She wore a black lace head covering, making her look like a Spanish princess.

Jeanette's mom, my Aunt Vanita, stepped forward in a white jacket and skirt, complete with matching white heels, and handed Jeanette a cream-

colored Bible with thick gold lettering on the front. Next Uncle Raul stepped forward and served Jeanette communion, the brilliant juice threatening to mar her dress as she sipped from the cup.

Then, when that was all over, they filed out of the auditorium and had a party in the foyer. Jeanette stood in a circle of light eating chocolate cake as her friends and the boys from her village gazed at the puffy pink dress and her beautiful Young Woman figure.

After Jeanette was done eating, she threw her paper plate in the trash can and leapt onto the back of a waiting stallion one of the boys had fetched. They rode through the church yard and out of town, disappearing into the Mexican horizon, her dress a blur of froth around the horse's flanks.

Since I didn't live in Mexico and I wasn't Latina, I was never going to have a Quinceañera. But no one had told me that yet. I hadn't grown up, hadn't heard the deadly truths my parents never spoke—about lives hanging like commas, waiting for the princes that never come.

I took to drawing pictures of princesses in ball gowns during church. Walter Beachy leaned on the pine pulpit and talked about submission and the evils of women wearing "war paint" while I drew rosy cheeks and necks dripping with jewels. When I sat next to my friend Ami, we would draw them together, giving them names like *Amber* or *Crystal*.

**I knew there
was no prince.
Yet I kept
sneaking
down to the
basement, . . .**

That is, we would draw them until Ami's mother set her mouth in a line and confiscated Ami's pencil. When this happened we were set adrift to stare around us at a room full of good Mennonites, old women in plain dresses with hankies stuffed in the folds, and the scent of spearmint Certs mixing with wood polish. Often I glanced over at my big sister Grace as she listened to Walter, her soft eyes shining above a modest pink blouse with puffy sleeves. A long French braid slipping down her back.

Grace and my mother were ample, obliging women. They liked the colors pink and purple and practiced the womanly arts of dressmaking and acquiescence. Grace won a 4-H medal for a loaf of wheat bread she baked in seventh grade.

I, on the other hand, was a late bloomer. I was tight-budded, angry, folded up—preferring mustard and chartreuse. Once I reached puberty, I willed boys to like me then found myself repulsed, outraged when they obliged. I examined their glistening yellow teeth, smelled their rank musk, and turned away. To pass the time, I imagined plucking off their heads and pasting replacements on their toothpick frames.

"I think I'm ugly," I said to Grace one night. Our rooms were connected by an L-shaped bathroom, and we talked into the dark from our beds, our voices echoing through the space between us.

"Stop saying that. You're just being stupid."

Staring into the darkness, fiercely. A few moments of quiet, then I gathered up my courage and repeated, "No. I know I'm ugly."

A disgusted sigh. More silence. Then, "Don't go getting a big head or anything, but you're not ugly. You're actually kind of . . . pretty."

"Thanks." Staring into the darkness, smiling like my face would break. Long brown hair floating, halo-like, on the pillow beneath me.

—*Carol Nowlin, Hilliard, Ohio, spends most of her time running after her two-year-old son and part-time as grants manager for an international ministry. She practices her rusty Spanish skills with friends and colleagues in hopes of someday being invited to a real Quinceañera. The closest she has yet come was a day trip to Tijuana, where she found delicious churros but no fluffy pink dresses.*



I Don't Need Your Help

Deborah Good

A truck pulled to the side of the road four miles outside of Fairbanks, Alaska, and a young hitchhiker got in, requesting a ride to the edge of Denali National Park. There he planned to fend for himself in the wilderness for several months.

The concerned driver, an experienced outdoorsman, tried to convince the young man that he was not prepared for the ravages of the Alaskan wild, but to no avail. "I'm absolutely positive," the young man assured the older, "I won't run into anything I can't deal with on my own."

Thus begins Jon Krakauer's telling of a remarkable and true story, a book which inspired Sean Penn's recently released movie by the same title—"Into the Wild," directed by Sean Penn.

Perhaps it grows from the Declaration of Independence. Perhaps from our head-over-heels love affair with capitalism. I do not know for sure where it began, but most people would likely agree with me on this point: By and large, United States society—and particularly middle- and upper-class society—is enamored with personal independence.

It could be a national mantra: *I don't need your help.*

I won't run into anything I can't deal with on my own.

We think we ought to rely on our families and friends as little as possible. We do our best to own everything we need. We hate asking for help from people we know, much less from the state welfare office, and far too many of us look down on those who do. We revere independence; we strive for it like the early conquistadors for gold.

Yet the fact that, just now, I drank a glass of grape juice in the warmth of my own home was far from an independent act. It required help from dozens of people, most of whom I have never met: the growers, the transporters, the factory workers, the folks at the grocery store, and my housemate who went shopping last week and placed the carton of juice on the refrigerator's top shelf, just to name a few.

The question, then, is not *whether* I am dependent or independent, but rather *who* I depend on and who depends on me. Our lives, whether we recognize it or not, are vast webs of needing one another, stretching out from us in sticky and interwoven strands. What does your web look like?

My web involves more than California grape-pickers. I've got some crazy-good friends in that web, people who have taught me, listened to me, stood up for me, fed me, lived with me, given me rides, and sometimes liter-

ally held me in their arms while I broke apart.

I could not have made it through two of the hardest years of my life—the one in which my dad died, and the one after it—on my own. It's as though I was being pulled forward by a hundred invisible strings grasped tightly on the other end by all the people who cared about me and my family. I am grateful

for my web.

Christopher J. McCandless's solo journey did not begin at the edge of Denali National Park. Two years earlier, the 22-year-old college graduate gave away all his money, ditched his car, and set off on a sojourn around the country without telling a single person where he was going. Chris soon abandoned his birth name and started going by Alex. His was a process of detaching—from a conventional life that seemed meaningless, and from everything and everyone that belonged to it.

This quest for un-attachment carries an almost romantic appeal for me—and apparently for millions of others (Krakauer's book is a national bestseller, and the movie has scored big at the box office). A sense of relationship to larger society brings with it responsibilities and, all too often, a long list of "shoulds" and "oughts," media saturation and god-awful materialism. There is wisdom in McCandless's retreat from mainstream expectations to define his own life.

The question . . . is not *whether* I am dependent or independent, but rather *who* I depend on and who depends on me.

But Alex's desire for independence went beyond his questioning of societal values; he tried to pull out of his web altogether, detaching from friends, family, and interdependence in general. "You are wrong," Alex wrote to an elderly man he met in his travels, "if you think Joy emanates only or principally from human relationships." His point was, in part, that happiness also lies in the natural world, all around us, and that it takes an unconventional eye to see it there. Thoreau must have understood this too.

I question, however, the presumption that a meaningful life is possible without human relationships. Alex met several people in his travels who grew to love him, but he slipped very easily into and out of their lives. He was not willing to need others or be needed by them. He was captain of his own ship. According to Krakauer, McCandless was always relieved when he "evaded the impending threat of human intimacy, of friendship, and all the messy emotional baggage that comes with it."

During his months alone in the Alaskan wilderness, however, it seems that something deep inside Alex began to shift. By month three, he was reading *Doctor Zhivago* and scrawling in the margins with bold, capital letters, "HAPPINESS ONLY REAL WHEN SHARED."

There is a private investigator who lives inside me. She quietly searches

Alex's desire for independence went beyond his questioning of societal values; he tried to pull out of his web altogether. . . .

Society—in the most official and capitalized sense of the word—for the ideas that rule us, the myths that keep us striving after certain things while ignoring many of those we pass along the way.

How is it possible that in the richest country in the world, people die every day from lack of food and home and love? This is a question with many answers, some wrapped in complicated two-party politics and laissez-faire economics, but one answer is quite simple: We do not care enough about one another; we are far too busy looking after ourselves.

Those of us with money have a habit of separating ourselves—even physically—from one another. We live in homes separated by walls, yards, barking dogs, even paid security guards. In Guatemala, Ethiopia, and elsewhere, I remember seeing the sharp edges of broken bottles sticking from the tops of cement walls built to keep others out.

Meanwhile, the poor live nearly on top of each other, but know—because they have no choice—that they must help one another out to survive. Poverty is dreadful, and I would never wish it on anyone, but I do think theirs is a good lesson for all of us.

In his 1985 Nobel Lecture, Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu pleaded with us, exasperated that we do not take better care of one another, especially the world's destitute, and instead pour our resources into defense. "God created us for fellow-

ship," he said. "God created us so that we should form the human family, existing together because we were made for one another. We are *not made for an exclusive self-sufficiency but for interdependence*, and we break the law of our being at our peril." (emphasis added)

In reality, we are all interconnected in countless ways—whether through grape juice or through friendship. The idea that any of us is—or should be—*independent* is based in a myth coveted unflinchingly by the very society Christopher McCandless was trying to escape.

In such a society, community-making becomes an act of revolution. Don't be fooled: We all know that re-

lationships are hard work. But if McCandless is right and happiness *is* only real when shared, then it is well worth the effort.

So, while the media advertises every material goods to satisfy every possible individual need, while our government proclaims values of freedom and independence, let us reach out to one another and form circles of interdependence. Let us need and be needed. Let us join the revolution.

—Deborah Good, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, is a Master of Social Work student at Temple University. She recommends *Into the Wild*—both book and movie. She can be reached at deborahagood@gmail.com.

Simple Names

Simple people trample on the desert.
I write their names in the sand.
There's a little space for them
in a room that grows more crowded.
After a while I can't hear them anymore.
I forget what they tell me and
what I've said to them.
My thoughts are back in the desert
where storms are always forming.
Soon tempestuous winds stir up the sand
until the floor is a smooth, clean thing
awaiting new names.

—Michael Degan is an editor for *Herald Press*.
He lives in Ephrata, Pa., with his wife, Becky,
and year-old son, Matthew.

Secularizing St. Augustine in “No Country for Old Men”

Dave Greiser

When Christian academics began writing about postmodern philosophy in the early 1990s, they responded to it in one of two ways. One way involved recoiling in horror while attempting to debunk Derrida, Foucault, and company by demonstrating the absurdity of their “absolute relativism.”

A second response was more measured and positive. It involved some appreciative exposition on the parallels they perceived between postmodernism’s suspicion of ideologies and power and the Christian conception of sin. What Derrida and the “masters of suspicion” before him—Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche—unwittingly recovered was nothing less than a secularized version of Augustine’s analysis of original sin and depravity. There is an undeniable parallel between Augustine’s distrust of fallen human nature and the suspicion of human motivation found in much contemporary postmodern philosophy and hermeneutics.

And now to the film review. (There is a connection.) The latest offering from Joel and Ethan Coen, “No Country for Old Men,” is a chilling portrayal of human depravity in a world without God. “No Country” studies a collection of people whose intelligence, emotional maturity, moral awareness, and luck vary greatly, but whose characters and motives reveal a twisted, not-to-be-trusted evil.

The film is based on a 2005 novel of the same name by American novelist Cormac McCarthy. Analysts of McCarthy’s novels have long been fascinated by his creation of worlds in which God is absent yet the novels’ inhabitants are evil, even “sinful” by nature.

“No Country” is not an evening of light entertainment. Unlike earlier Coen films such as “O Brother, Where Art Thou,” “The Ladykillers,” “Intolerable Cruelty,” and even the classic “Fargo,” this is not a comedy, though it contains darkly comedic moments. It has elements of an action thriller and even the slasher film, but it is essentially a series of character studies.

Unlike earlier Coen films, the characters here are respected rather than lampooned. This is a violent film. But its violence is usually more suggested than graphic. We see bloated bodies, blood leaking across a floor, and a shirt with a bloody bullet hole. Like many a Hitchcock film, the power is in the suggestion.

Analysts of McCarthy’s novels have long been fascinated by his creation of worlds in which God is absent yet the novels’ inhabitants are evil, even “sinful” by nature.

A sketch of the plot is quickly drawn. Llewelyn Moss (played by Josh Broslin) is a poor but self-confident man living with his child-wife in a west Texas trailer park. He stumbles upon a drug deal gone bad while hunting in the desert. Everyone at the scene is dead, and the drugs are still stashed in the back of a pickup.

Under a nearby tree, Llewelyn finds another body, along with \$2 million in cash. By lifting this money for himself, Moss unwittingly becomes the target of a hit man, one Anton Chigurh (yes, that’s the correct spelling).

Chigurh (Javier Bardem) may be the creepiest, most inhuman human character I have ever seen in a movie. He kills his victims with a cattle stun gun and enjoys involving them in games of chance that will determine whether they live or die. Chigurh pursues the overly confident Moss across the country through a series of small towns and cheap hotels.

A second drug dealer learns about this chase and sends his own hit man, Carson Wells (played by Woody Harrelson) in pursuit of the cash. Chasing them all is the world-weary, slow talking sheriff of Moss’ own small town, Ed Tom Bell (Tommy Lee Jones affecting a perfect George Bush drawl).

Sheriff Bell and his small town friends are the moral voice of the film, such as there is one. Over breakfast in the diner, they wonder aloud how their part of the world has devolved

from a community where people once said “sir” and “ma’am” into a place where people kill for money, drugs, and even sport. In the end, the sheriff despairs of this new world and turns in his badge. “God isn’t listening any more,” he concludes.

The other characters are by turns studies in greed, sadism, and overconfidence. And while the ending of the film won’t satisfy many moviegoers, I think it is a faithful summation of the world the story inhabits. In this story no one is to be trusted; human nature is evil and calculating.

But where can I begin to praise filmmaking this good? While I cannot say I enjoyed the story, I was stunned by the quality of storytelling and artistry. The Coens trust their material so completely that there is no need for a musical sound track. There are long periods in which there is no dialogue. The story often advances in wordless scenes in which characters act rather than speak their motivations. The cat and mouse game between the hunter and hunted is so tense that at points I was reminding myself to breathe.

When characters do speak, the di-

alog is a fine blend of blue-collar simplicity and the Coens’ own offbeat philosophical wit. People will be quoting lines from this film for years, much as they now repeat lines from “O Brother.” The storytelling is lean and spare, and trusts the intelligence of the viewer in making connections.

The visual aspects of the film are outstanding as well. The west Texas scenery is harshly beautiful, a perfect setting for this kind of a story. The attention to detail in the appearance of the rotting corpses and faces still registering surprise at their imminent deaths is not soon forgotten.

With each new film my admiration for the filmmaking of the Coens increases. So does my sense of curiosity about the inner life and psyche of these men who create such canvasses. We are, all of us, a mixture of beauty and evil. For those with the stomach for it, “No Country for Old Men” is a powerful reminder.

—*Dave Greiser lives with his own inner mixture of beauty and evil in Hesston, Kansas, where he teaches and directs the Pastoral Ministries Program at Hesston College.*



“The Small, Beautiful Thing”: Saying No in a Culture of Yes

Valerie Weaver-Zercher

I had just said no. To the same woman from church. For the third time. Who could blame her for getting a little testy?

This time she had called to ask whether I would lead singing at the church picnic. Once again I had said no—like I’d done when she had called to ask me to do other things at church—and quickly added that I was sorry.

This time there was a silence on the other end of the line before she tacked on the real zinger: “Well. I’m sorry, too.”

Now, you must know this: I have sometimes been in her position, calling around to find someone to fill some role at church and being repeatedly told no. So I am intimately acquainted with the desire to make the person saying no feel guilty. I’ve just never had the nerve to actually do it.

My conversations with the woman from my church have made me feel more guilty about some-

thing I already feel horrible about doing: setting limits on my life. Since having children, I have dropped almost all of my church commitments. The church-volunteering ball is actually only one of many that I've dropped; somehow parenthood has turned my previously impressive juggling act of writer-churchgoer-activist-wife-friend into a comedy routine, in which the juggler slowly drops each of the balls, one by one, until they are all rolling around on the floor.

Most people agree that life today requires us to live faster than ever before. We carry a generalized feeling of "too-muchness"—too much stuff, too much to do, too many phone calls from people at church asking us to do things.

The statistics themselves are so familiar that they're almost clichés: In 1990, the average American consumed more than twice as much as the average American did in 1948—and also reported having less free time. In the last 20 years, the numbers of hours Americans spend working has increased steadily. Thirty percent of Americans say they experience high stress nearly every day.

I want to look at three of the factors that I believe contribute to the out-of-control nature of modern life, especially for Christians: choices, consumption, and conscience. I will then examine the idea of a "smaller life," rooted in what Barbara Brown Taylor has called "the spiritual practice of saying no."

Choices—Or "I need to keep my options open"

Soccer team or violin lessons? Social work or psychology major? Paper or plastic? Rare or well-done? Mac or PC? College or trade school? Organic or local? Public or private? Cable or DSL? White or wheat? Bike or drive?

Little characterizes middle-class American life as much as options. Endless options mean endless possibilities—and endless expectation.

Choice is not inherently a bad thing; a certain amount of it improves the quality of our lives. But there is a cost to having an "overload of choice," as Barry Schwartz writes in *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less* (HarperPerennial, 2004) "Clinging tenaciously to all the choices available to us contributes to bad decisions, to anxiety, stress, and dissatisfaction—even to clinical depression," Schwartz writes. And, I would add, a sense of spiritual emptiness.

I need to keep my options open.

Consumption—Or "I need to buy more"

We visited some friends in their home recently. We had good conversations about our lives, kids, and jobs. What I came away with, however, was not only a sense of joy in renewing an old friendship. (And let me be clear that this was *not* their problem but mine.) What I came away with was this: Our house is hopelessly shabby. Their house holds gorgeous paintings and candlesticks and tablecloths; we, until recently, had a trash bag rigged up to a chair in our living room so that it didn't fall apart. Our futon frame

was nicked all over by golf clubs wielded by little boys pretending to be Tiger Woods.

And if I'm like most Americans, I'm no longer comparing myself and my things only to my friends, family, and neighbors. Thanks to the pervasiveness of the media, many Americans are no longer only trying to keep up with the Joneses; we're trying to keep up with the Gateses.

Sometimes I am a little proud of our shabbiness. Other times all I want to do is go out and buy a new couch.

I need to buy more.

Conscience—Or "I need to change the world."

Motherhood catapulted me from a world of college-age idealism into sleep-deprived, 30-something cynicism. Before having kids and even during the first few years of parenthood, I considered myself something of an activist. Even after the babies started coming, I still thought I could do the usual activist schtick.

But after a couple times of standing downtown, holding an anti-war sign while the baby howled in the sling and the toddler tried to fling himself in front of passing cars, I have basically given up—at least on rallies at busy street corners with children.

There is so much wrong in the world: War. Poverty. Homelessness. Starvation. Global warming. And there are so many people to help: the woman with lung cancer down the street; the sad kid next door; the young mother at church; the homeless man on my way to work. *I really need to change the world.*

Kee*p your options open, buy more, change the world:* the combination is enough to land one in counseling. Or perhaps, at least, in church.

"Too-muchness" may be a uniquely modern problem, but Scripture offers some direction as we face the dilemmas of limitless options and jam-packed schedules. In Psalm 16 the psalmist writes, "The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places." Here the psalmist invokes the law that governed the division of Canaan among the tribes of Israel, in which people were instructed to be content with the portion granted them. He goes on to not only remind readers of the law regarding how Canaan was divided, but to actually compare God to one of the plots of inherited land: "The Lord is my chosen portion."

The incarnation itself could be seen as an exercise in containment and boundaries: the Creator of the universe choosing to dwell in the unremarkable vessel of a human body, in a particular place and a particular time. Christ's ministry was one of meeting specific needs, one at a time, traveling by foot, whiling away hours he could have been working or praying instead eating and drinking with sinners.

So if God can choose smallness, then perhaps we can too. Theologian Stephanie Paulsell has written about her epiphany that a worthy life doesn't necessarily require large action. She recounts meeting a scholar whose work she admired very much. While

this teacher and scholar had done much worthy work during her career, “what she had not done was write ‘the big book,’ the monograph that laid out her theory of everything. I asked her if she planned to write such a book,” writes Paulsell in the March 20, 2007 issue of the *The Christian Century*, “‘Oh,’ [the woman] replied, ‘I prefer to do the small, beautiful thing.’”

Paulsell writes about how doing the “small, beautiful thing” goes against what Christians often think we hear as the message of the gospel—to go into all the world to preach, to end poverty, to help everyone. “I have noticed,” says Paulsell, “that some of my students shift uncomfortably in their seats when I talk about this. They are in school to learn how to change the world. When I say small, they hear irrelevant, ineffectual.”

Pursuing a large and limitless life is a well-known part of youth, and many of us closer to middle age would do well to remember the ideals of our younger selves. But sometimes babies come along, or you get cancer, or you care for an aging relative, or you lose your job, and living a large life of yes after yes after yes simply becomes impossible. Sometimes, only when we can no longer say yes do we learn the spiritual discipline of saying no.

Writer Barbara Brown Taylor argues that the spiritual practice of saying no requires, among other things, the discipline of “ego-evacuation.” Saying no makes me see myself as I

Only when we can no longer say yes, do we learn the spiritual discipline of saying no.

truly am rather than as I’d like to be—someone who can manage and organize a life full of yeses. Saying no means that I’m frequently afraid that other people are disappointed in me.

But saying no also “whittles me down to size, giving me daily opportunities to remember who is God and who is not,” observes Taylor in the September 18, 2007 issue of *The Christian Century*. “Facing other people’s disappointment in me lets some of the gas out of my self-image.”

Choosing Small in a culture of Big, saying No in a culture of Yes, requires discipline beyond our own powers, and forces us to rely on God’s strength and the support of a community. “You show me the path of life,” writes the psalmist in Psalm 16—“not the path of Efficiency, or Speed, or Success, or even the Path of the Unconditional Yes. The path of *Life*.”

As for the woman at church who was calling to ask me to do things: she’s trying e-mail with me now. As for me: I’m learning that I can type “no” as fast as I can say it. I can only pray that, as Taylor writes, “learning to say no is how I clear space for a few carefully planted yeses to grow.” I can only pray that God is in my “no” as much as in my “yes,” and that God dwells as deeply in small lives as in large ones.

—*Valerie Weaver-Zercher is a writer, editor, and mother in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania. This article is adapted from a sermon at Salford Mennonite Church (Oct. 21, 2007).*

Life Goes On

Noël R. King

I gave blood that day because I thought it was a nice thing to do for the world. I was not offering sweat or tears, but the least I could do was offer blood.

It went nicely and smoothly, as far as I could tell. My blood ran red and rich, B+ at its best. They gave me cookies and some juice and sent me on my way.

Three days later, the donor center administrator called me on the phone and asked if he could see me, pronto soon, that afternoon?

“Don’t worry, you don’t have HIV-AIDS or anything,” he said, “but if you could please come in regardless, Mrs. Smithlebee?”

“Well,” I said, “if I really must, I suppose I could, shortly.”

“Excellent,” he said. “I shall await your arrival.”

I probably had one of those African brain-eating irregularities or mad cow disease they always asked you about, was the first thing I thought. But I thought it with a laugh and a snort, so preposterous the possibility.

I really wasn’t worried. I felt fine; I ate no meat; I didn’t live in a slum; I indulged in no “risky behavior” with needles or humans; I hadn’t been bit by my dog.

Mr. Runkle, as he had introduced himself to me, met me at his office door when I arrived and showed

me in. He closed the door and said, "You are going to live forever!"

"What?" I said. Had I (my blood as well) been stolen by a cult, despite my usual best intentions not to be?

"Oh, I shouldn't have blurted it out the way I did, but I couldn't help it," he sighed. "I saw your blood. You have a streak of immortality programmed in your cells, the red ones, in particular.

"The thing is," he went on, moving around to his desk and sitting down in his chair, which squeaked, "nobody believes me when I tell them such a thing is possible. I have learned to do my research very quietly; no one knows that I am even doing it now."

"Oh," I said.

"Yes," he said. "It probably is a bit much to hear that one is going to live forever, no warning and all, but I really had to tell you. You see that, don't you?"

"Uh," I said.

"Really," he said, "now you can live your life much more wisely, don't you think?"

"Well . . .," I said.

"Well, just in case you're wondering," he said, "I don't know any way of transferring this state to anybody else. Either you have it or you don't. You are the first that I have seen or heard about; there could be others, too, you know, but I don't know, offhand."

He stood up and held out his hand.

"Congratulations!" he said. "Have a great life!"

Then he said, "You can close the

door on your way out, if you would be so kind."

"Uh, well . . .," I said.

"Bye bye," he said.

I blinked, walked out, and drove home.

I wonder now if that was just that doctor's sick idea of a fun joke, but I don't want to ask anybody, because I certainly do not want to start some kind of hullabaloo.

Besides, I am kind of getting used to the idea, if you really want to know the truth.

My husband, though. How unnerving would that be for him to know he's go-

ing to die and I am not? I think it better not to tell him, frankly. I can always change my mind later, if I see that he is aging well and I think he can take it.

Of course the other thing I have been thinking a lot about is what I want to do with this very long life I seem to have acquired. I can pretty much do anything I care to attempt, it seems, if it only requires commitment, effort, and patience (i.e., time).

What really gets me excited, though, is that I would be the perfect cosmonaut in space.

You know how they always say that, well, we could fly to another galaxy or faraway planets or white dwarfs even, if we had the technology, but it would take the crew 100 light years just to get there?

Did I just hear my name, "Mrs. Smithlebee! Mrs. Smithlebee!""???

I think that I just did!

He closed the door and said, "You are going to live forever!"

I am going to see it all! The stars, the worlds, the big black holes (wheeeeeeee!! Such graviteeeeeee!) and this and that, for years and years and years.

Of course, I might have to wait a couple hundred years or so, or maybe wait even for a whole new civilization of people to come about, people who are a little smarter than these ones

around me now, to build me a spaceship that works, but I can wait, can't I?

—As circumstances warrant, through her Turquoise Pen column Noël R. King, Scottsville, Virginia, reports on strange and wonderful things, including finding out you have eternal life in your blood.

The Man—Made in God's Image

The man was tired and stressed from all the farm work his back hurt, his feet were tired The work days were long, the pay meager at best as he struggled to make every move count in those dark days of depression after World War II.

He was glad his thrifty wife was good at finding the most tender stalks of wild collard greens which grew along the fence, she could make a meal from them cooked with smoked ham, along with hot corn bread taste like a heavenly feast— And he had two young sons to help— strong sons they were but boys still.

The man needed to get the field work done that day, He instructed his sons to weed the rows of lima beans While he plowed the next field getting it ready to plant, but young boys don't always see the big picture. It was hot and the shade of the big old elm tree beckoned.

Now the man was a good father, an honest man, and kind But as he saw the sun slipping slightly toward the West and observed the un-hoed rows of Limas waiting while the boys played— frustration took over—and anger too.

His ultimatum was loud and firm:
“You boys get to work and get all those weeds
pulled before sundown or you will both get a whipping.”

But the man was not given to hitting his sons
And he regretted his words when they were scarcely out of his mouth.
He got on his tractor but his eyes kept wandering
over to his sons and he saw them working hard
but he saw how that in spite of their frenzied moving hands,
the end of the two rows were still a long, long
way ahead of them.

As the sun continued on its journey, sinking
steadily toward the west, the man suddenly stopped the tractor
in mid field and ran to his sons side.
He began weeding furiously beside them
until all the weeds were pulled and
the rows neat and clean as two happy boys and one grateful father
walked arm in arm into the house,
the smell of supper coming from the kitchen
and the warm welcoming smile of the woman who was mother and wife.

—Freda Zehr, Wilmington, Delaware. When her husband, Vernon Zehr Jr. (one of those sons) told Freda this story of his childhood memory of his father, Vernon Zehr Sr., she thought of our heavenly father.



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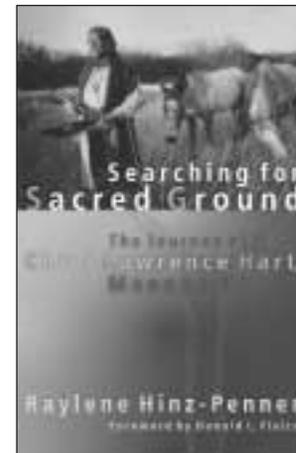
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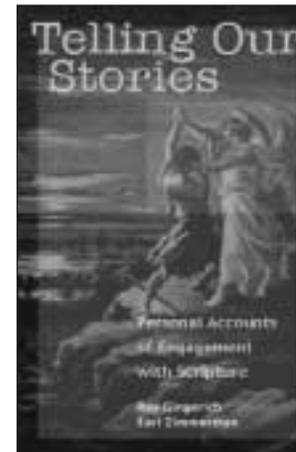
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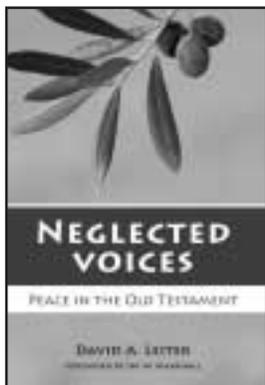
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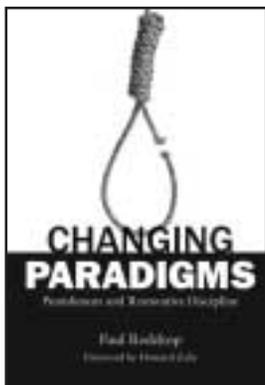
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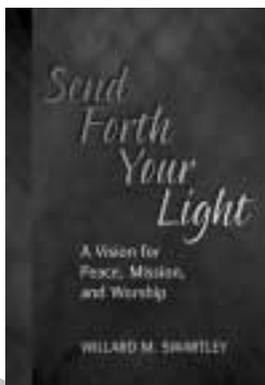
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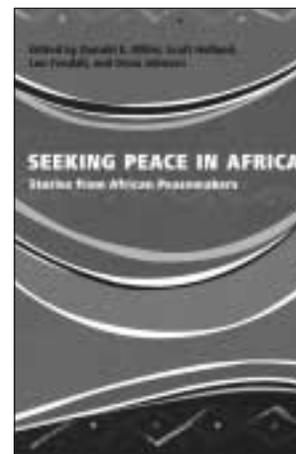
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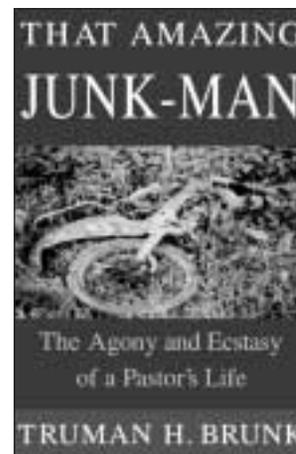
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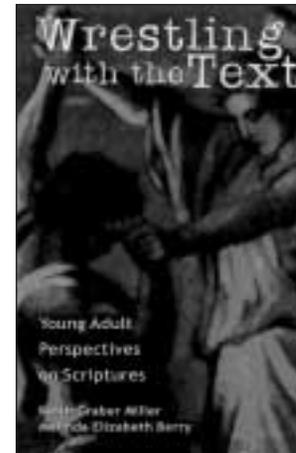


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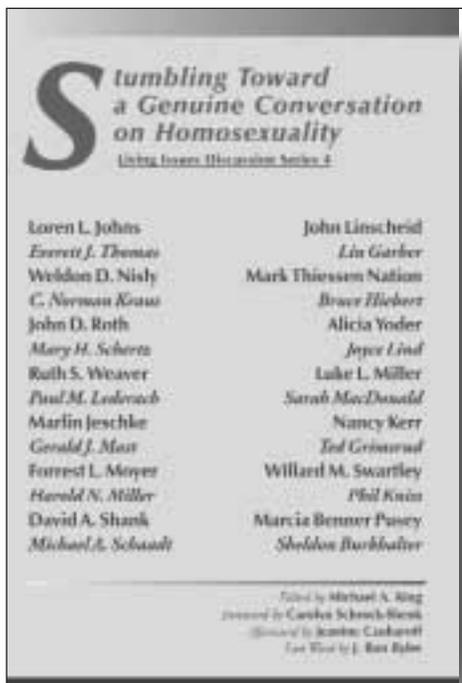
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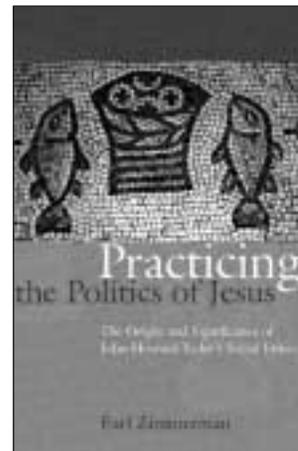
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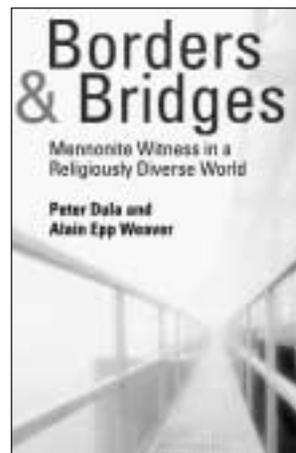
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Before the Service

He meanders in grace,
eyes wrinkling into his cheeks,
lips mingling with the divine,
arms reaching heaven.
He hushes sin in a breath,
his hands stained with prayer.
I sit in the back
listening to him prepare.
Silence entwined with names,
Michael . . . Darla . . . Julie.
I wait for mine
feeling it slide through his mouth,
mysteriously rising
like incense toward God

—Cheryl Denise, *Philippi, West Virginia*, is author of *I Saw God Dancing* (Dream-Seeker Books, 2005) the collection of poetry from which this poem comes. “They’ll,” another poem in the collection, was read by Garrison Keillor on “Writer’s Almanac,” October 9, 2007.