

# **D**reamSeeker Magazine

Voices from the Soul



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*Health Care and Community*

Mark R. Wenger

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Michael A. King

## **An Atheist Finds God Yet Not God**

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*My Two Cents on a Flat Stomach*

Deborah Good

*and much more*

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**Autumn 2009**

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# Editorial: Love Notes from the Edge

Love notes from the edge. That's what I see in the writings of this Autumn 2009 issue of *DreamSeeker Magazine*.

Oh, there is anger mixed in, maybe especially in Mark Wenger's passionate plea for a better health care system just as the latest effort to reform the U.S. system seems to be unraveling. Prophetic anger here and elsewhere is appropriate.

But I see these writings as being primarily love notes. Because each is ultimately, I believe, motivated by love, including Wenger, whose love is for those our system destroys.

The love in Ray Fisher's article on homosexuality seems to me unmistakable. In the midst of reporting his hard-won insights for how we might more fruitfully talk about one of the most divisive issues of the day, Fisher radiates love. For his LGBTQ community. For the church. For those with whom he disagrees.

Then come intertwining articles on God. They are quite different. Mary Alice Hostetter writes of finding God in one type of journey. My column, basically by "Anonymous" arguing against the viability of faith in God, offers a conversation on God. Next Alan Soffin's article explores the nature of not believing in God.

Yet somehow in Hostetter's quest for a God beyond the one she starts with, in the inability of Anonymous to believe in the God of his youth (even as the old gospel songs haunt him), and in Soffin's belief in "God who is not God," I find love for God radiating. I end up feeling more passion for God after experiencing these love notes from the edge of faith than I often do when encountering

pieties emanating from the center of faith.

The topics shift as Deborah Good writes of flat stomachs—but the theme persists, because Deborah is angry at how our culture treats bodies precisely as she writes a love note to and for them. Renee Gehman ponders the connections and similarities of love notes written to those who leave us through marriage or even death. David Greiser lets us see his love for finding that point where film-making edges into theology is what drives his movie reviewing. Daniel Hertzler's book reviews help us disentangle love of bad food from love for truly nurturing food.

Finally, the poets take us from autumn to Christmas, when God puts skin (Alderfer). As for Gible, now *there* is a love note from the edge. Ponder it; I still am. —*Michael A. King*

**Love notes from the edge. That's what I see in the writings of this Autumn 2009 issue of *DreamSeeker Magazine*.**



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**Dear Editors:**

For my devotions this morning I read *The Mennonite*, something that I don't regularly do (use *The Mennonite* for devotions). Eventually I came onto Michael King's essay (reprinted in *DreamSeeker Magazine*, Summer 2009), "When Something Takes the Babies."

It just didn't feel right to move on with the day's activities without first saying thanks to you. That little piece is profound, precious, insightful. In the stillness of the morning (with the robins breaking into the new day) it was a bit overwhelming! —*Ray Gingrich, Harrisonburg, Virginia*

**Dear Editors:**

Thank you for Michael King's reflective essay, "When Something Takes the Babies." It spoke to my depths and was just what this reader needed! —*J. Eric Bishop, Lansdale, Pennsylvania*

**Dear Editors:**

A quick note to let you know how much I appreciated Michael King's article, "When Something Takes the

Babies." I am grateful that you were able to write such an article. It is stunning in its reality and resonated deeply for me as one who, working in a retirement home, has to deal with suffering and death every day. How I represent Christian faith in such an environment where I cannot offer solutions, don't have any good answers that are not trite, cannot actually help or heal, but can only offer my meager presence, has always been a profound challenge. Where is my God amid this?

As you say, faith often fails the test—miserably. And I share your struggle, almost word for word, that you confess to being tempted to leave the church in anger when you hear "one more account of how amid the bodies mangled by this accident or that disease, the one giving testimony was miraculously spared. . . ." You may be spared THIS time, but I see every day where *this life* ultimately ends for all of us. It is only a Lazarus reprieve.

Michael, thanks for your honesty. Today, I feel a little more discouraged but a lot less alone.—*Joe Miller, Honeybrook, Pennsylvania*



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

## Health Care and Community

Mark. R. Wenger

I was stunned—and then infuriated. The voice on the other end of the line represented a large national health insurance company which shall remain anonymous, although I've not forgotten its name. "We do not believe that admission to the hospital is medically indicated. We will not authorize admission or cover the costs."

I was a pastor in the home of a church member. It was evening; there was desperation in the air. The church member had seen a doctor earlier that day, a board-certified psychiatrist, who strongly recommended immediate admission to a mental health facility. I talked by phone with the doctor; I talked again by phone with the health insurance representative. No budge.

I could hardly believe my ears. An accountant 1000 miles away knew more than a physician who had just seen the patient.

The only option was to drive forty-five minutes to a hospital emergency room without assurance of being admitted, something the distressed person was unwilling to do. I left the home of this friend very worried. As it turned out, the next day the person's em-

ployer petitioned (and perhaps threatened) the insurance company and the admission was authorized.

**I**t's August 2009 as I write. The summer sun isn't the hottest item at the moment; health care reform is. Town hall meetings have disintegrated into shouting matches. Special interest groups on all sides of the debate have brought out the big guns, blazing away. This conflict has the feel of a civil war with fear and righteous indignation spilling from the media.

The fight is nothing new. In the words of an Associated Press article,

President Barack Obama's campaign for a health care overhaul is an intense installment in a long-running story, dating to Theodore Roosevelt in 1912. It did not go well nearly a century ago. Roosevelt made national health insurance an issue in his last, losing campaign for the White House, and successive efforts to get it enacted have lost, too.

I hope the effort finally succeeds this time. And I also hope the reform includes the so-called "public option" authorizing the government to provide health insurance. If I had my way, I'd like to see the United States adopt a single-payer system like Canada or Great Britain's National Health System.

I'm not usually a fan of movie-maker Michael Moore, neither his message nor his "gotcha" style of journalism. But his 2007 movie "Sicko" turned me into an unlikely fan. When

he traveled with a group of patients denied coverage in the U.S. and took them to Cuba for free medical treatment, I cheered them on.

I don't typically promote a stronger role for government. I prefer smaller networks of community in neighborhoods, families, congregations, clubs, work places, and sports teams. That's where face-to-face relationships over time foster the vital human connections that give life color and meaning.

But this time the issue and the need are different. I believe the government—state and national—must act to bring some sanity to the competing and bullying private interests that, for too long, have played mean-spirited hardball at the expense of average citizens.

**I** am not a health care expert; I don't pretend to understand all the complexities. I've been covered by private health insurance most of my fifty-four years—as a missionary kid, as a student, and as a bivocational pastor. I've had it pretty good.

During my years of pastoring, however, I often walked alongside persons facing health and financial uncertainty and have helped to coordinate numerous collaborative support and caring efforts. Healing and health care are, in fact, at the taproot of the Christian tradition and community. That's the heart of the issue for me.

Morton Kelsey, in his book *Healing and Christianity* (Harper & Row, 1973), contends that Jesus Christ "showed more interest in physical and

mental health than any other religious figure in history." During his lifetime Jesus was known primarily as a healer and deliverer from hostile spirits. Healing was part of the DNA of Christ's mission.

Jesus operated with an unusual access policy; he was particularly responsive to those on the fringe of social networks. Of the 41 healing and deliverance stories recorded in the traditional Gospels, one-third of them involved women and one-third touched people that no one wanted around, including several foreigners.

In a culture where disease was usually attributed to sin or even God's judgment, Jesus showed compassion and love for the sick and haunted. He didn't blame the victims.

This story has been carried forward by millions of Jesus' followers. Amanda Porterfield, a professor at Florida State University, makes a remarkable claim in the book *Healing in the History of Christianity*: "Healing has persisted over time and across cultural spaces as a defining element of Christianity and a major contributor to Christianity's endurance, expansion and success" (Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 19).

**I**n light of this trajectory, something is shameful and immoral about the current health care system in the United States. The rich can toy with

breast implants and tummy tucks while the poor can't afford to get a rotting tooth filled. If you lose your job, there goes the health coverage too.

**Something is shameful and immoral about the current health care system in the United States. The rich can toy with breast implants and tummy tucks while the poor can't afford to get a rotting tooth filled.**

Doctors play defensive medicine, ordering pricey, superfluous tests just to keep from being sued. Patients can't buy insurance because of a pre-existing condition. Health claims get denied because the insurance company has to watch its profit margin. And just to keep track of the tangled billing system requires a dual degree in accounting

and law.

Speaking of "Swashbucklers of the Day," Garrison Keillor likens the current scheme to "the railroads of the early nineteenth century, when each line decided its own gauge and each stationmaster decided what time it is" (*New York Times*, Aug. 12, 2009). It reminds me of the tangle of a thousand fishing poles, fishing lines, and sharp hooks. How are you supposed to catch any fish and feed hungry people without getting hurt?

Americans have understood the communal benefit of public schools, public water systems, road construction, mail delivery, and public safety. Where does the resistance to public health care come from? I'm persuaded that it is rooted in the weed patch of fear, selfishness, and greed.

Right now the weeds are growing like kudzu, an alien vine that threatens to choke the tree of freedom and

moral values rooted in the Jesus movement and Christian tradition. I know countless medical professionals and institutions are sacrificially dedicated to alleviating human suffering and sickness. The problem is that their admirable efforts are hampered by the mess of a hopeless system.

A caring, effective community fashions networks that equitably provide the basics for the common good: food and water, shelter, care and education of children, public safety, respect for the aged. The time has come for the United States to recognize this shared obligation and practical benefit for all in health care.

This conclusion, however, does not rest ultimately on a cost-benefit analysis. Rather, it grows from the taproot of Jesus' healing ministry and the enduring Christian tradition of caring for the sick.

This moral base is the primary reason I support national health care reform. A hundred years after Teddy Roosevelt first proposed national health insurance, I hope it finally comes to pass.

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

### Comfort

That day lightning flashed,  
 even as the sun shone in a clear sky,  
 My little child, always so fearful of lightning,  
 was playing in the yard.  
 She came running to the house, crying.  
 With what I thought was a stroke of mother-genius,  
 I asked her, "Do you remember the verse?"  
 On the take-home Sunday school paper  
 that Sunday it had been,  
 "I will be with you always."  
 She was clinging to me, sobbing.  
 "I remember," she said,  
 "but I want to be near somebody with skin on."

—Helen Wade Alderfer, Goshen, Indiana, is part of a poetry writing group, volunteers at the local elementary school, remains active in her assisted living and church communities, and was long an editor of various Mennonite magazines. She is author of *The Mill Grinds Fine: Collected Poems* (DreamSeeker Books, 2009).

## Response to *Stumbling Toward a Genuine Conversation on Homosexuality*

by Ray Fisher

I was delighted to discover the moving collection of essays edited by Michael A. King, *Stumbling Toward a Genuine Conversation on Homosexuality* (Cascadia, 2007). The honesty and openness of the dialogue reaffirmed the pride I feel in my Mennonite heritage.

In this collection, church leaders raised challenges to the lesbian and gay community that remain unanswered. From the gay and lesbian side of that dialogue came a complex mass of emotions—mostly hurt, sometimes anger, often confusion and internal discord, frequently too raw to be channeled productively.

A goal of this response is to move the conversation forward by (1) responding to the challenges raised by church leaders in King's collection and (2) suggesting a structure for channeling the energy and emotion of our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters. I first lay some groundstones for my thinking and then set out a proposal for a collective moving forward.

### About my vantage point in this discussion

I am in some respects an improbable person to insert

myself into this discussion. A gay man in a 13-year committed relationship, I was raised and baptized in the Mennonite community, more precisely the “Beachy Amish” church. My break with Mennonite faith occurred

in my first year at Messiah College; I came out about a year thereafter, shortly before transferring to finish my studies at Harvard College. For more than 20 years subsequently, in my life as a law student and international finance lawyer based in New York, I variously wore the label “atheist” or “agnostic” and shed all ties to Mennonites.

It took a transfer to Frankfurt, Germany, to reconnect me with the community of faith. My move to Frankfurt, in my early 40s, left me without a network of friends. It also gave me a prime chance to explore my ethnic heritage.

Against this background, I stumbled—out of curiosity—into the Mennonite congregation in Frankfurt. I met such warmth and friendliness that it was impossible not to return. The congregation exhibited wonderful Christ-likeness in their desire to learn to know me as a person, as I am and not as I should be—and to leave the judgments of me and my lifestyle to my creator.

This was true of their approach to faith generally, since they embraced in their small circle a range of beliefs from orthodox evangelicalism to

those espousing quite liberal feminist or liberation theologies. This small grouping of Mennonite Christians became my home away from home, my close circle of friends in a foreign land.

**I was raised and baptized in . . . the “Beachy Amish” church. My break with Mennonite faith occurred in my first year at Messiah College; I came out about a year thereafter. . . .**

When one is faced with such a clear and sincere expression of the love of God, terms such as *atheist* and *agnostic* lose their meaning as organizational principles for one’s life. I did not join that congregation as a formal member, for a mix of reasons (the time was not right), but that wonderful congregation remains the “ground zero” for my re-engagement with the community of faith.

My desire to remain engaged continues, but I am somewhat lacking in opportunity—though I work and live in New York City during the week, my weekends are spent in eastern Berks County, Pennsylvania. While I am visiting a nearby Mennonite church on weekends, I remain cautious. Among other things, at this stage of my ongoing journey of faith, my theological leanings, my current understanding of the nature of God and faith, are “liberal” enough that they may be a source of discomfort.

More importantly, I have learned that any congregation that accepts me into its membership may be subject to sanction or perhaps expulsion by reason of my 13-year continuing partnership with Juan Carlos. That is too much for me to ask of any group.

### Choosing the right vocabulary

Many gays and lesbians use the term *LGBTQ* or “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, or queer” (or variants thereof) to describe sexual minorities generally. In King’s collection, Harold N. Miller decries the “Anabaptist GLTB community’s support of bisexuality,” suggesting that gays and lesbians are advocating an active, sexually swinging, ambidextrous lifestyle. The assertion is mystifying and probably reflects a serious misunderstanding. Is Miller reacting to the “B” part of “LGBTQ”? If our terminology proves a stumbling block, we should change it.

LGBTQ has special importance in the gay political world as a rejection of bigotry internally among the community. In the early generations of gay activists, there was a certain lack of acceptance of individuals who called themselves “bisexual,” with an implication that they were too insecure in their sexuality to become full-fledged members of the gay community. In that era, lesbians and gays often pursued differing agendas, with less communication across the aisle than would have been ideal. This tendency was only exacerbated in the 1980s, with the advent of AIDS as a gay male, not a lesbian, disease.

Similarly, in the 1980s and early 1990s, as gays started to integrate openly into the professional workplace, there was a tendency for integrated gays to distance themselves from the transgendered community, worrying that integrating people of more aberrant sexuality into their struggle for workplace respectability

would be counterproductive. *Queer* is an umbrella term intended to address all those of non-mainstream sexuality.

Against this background, the recent predominance of “LGBTQ” in a political context is a wholly positive step, a rejection by the sexual-minority community of internecine bigotry and bias, an expression of “we’re all in this together.”

The context of the current discussion in the Mennonite faith community is different. Mennonites are not, in my mind, having so much a “civil rights” discussion as a pragmatic one of how to reconcile the tension that arises when persons who feel called to Mennonite faith are unable to meet the discipleship guidelines that the church has chosen for itself.

In the context of conjugal covenants, in particular, it is not particularly relevant whether given persons are bisexual in desire or transgendered as a matter of personal history. What is relevant to the discussion is that they are proposing to enter a conjugal covenant as two men or two women.

For this reason, in this context, I use the terms *lesbian* and *gay*. I would be delighted if the church could use the term *LGBTQ* without stumbling—but if the term causes offense, I propose that we move beyond semantics and focus on the underlying substance.

### On avoiding hypocrisy and double standards

A rather dire view of gay partnerships is painted by Harold N. Miller in his chapter in King’s book. In

essence, he asserts that gay relationships are inherently non-monogamous and thus constitute a failure as expressions of conjugal commitment. This is implicitly contrasted with the more stable and fulfilling nature of conjugal commitment within the structures of the church.

Leave aside the fact that Miller is generalizing without empirical evidence—the gay men in my circle of friends and acquaintances are almost all in stable, long-term relationships. Crucially, Miller fails to note that he is contrasting a community of unbelievers on one hand with a community of faith on the other. Judged by Miller’s own yardstick, heterosexual marriage in society at large is a colossal failure—consider the rates of divorce, infidelity, and parenthood outside of wedlock.

To paraphrase the conservative columnist William Safire of the *New York Times*, straight people need not worry that gay marriage will undermine traditional marriage; the straight population is succeeding magnificently in bringing about that destruction on its own. The relevant question is not what gay and lesbian conjugal union looks like generally, but what it can mean in a Mennonite and Christian context.

Some discussions in King’s book also reveal a disregard (whether willing or naïve) of the realities of sexuality among straight Mennonites today. In my own family of eight siblings, I have good reason to think that the vast majority were not virgins at moment of marriage. Yet today the vast majority are in long-term monoga-

mous marriages that reflect the church’s teachings.

Based on conversations with Mennonite friends, I strongly doubt that my family is unique. This failure to speak the full truth of Mennonite practice may serve a certain purpose, but in the context of gay Christians it seems hypocritical.

I believe the church benefits from acknowledging that human beings often fall short of the standards they aspire to. But if that acknowledgment is to be extended in the form of understanding (implicitly or explicitly) to our straight young people, the church must also be prepared to extend it (implicitly or explicitly) to our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters as well.

### **Conjugal covenant as a community endeavor**

“It takes a village,” according to a prominent national politician, to ensure the well-being and successful rearing of children—a support network of family, school, and community. The same principle applies to maintaining the sanctity of conjugal union.

I recall when one of my sisters confronted a situation of marital fidelity shortly after having her first child. For a period of several long weeks, it seemed doubtful that the relationship could or should continue. But a large support network kicked in, consisting in the first instance of family but also of church. The situation was turned around, and post-intervention, with two more wonderful children, the marriage seems stronger than ever.

Those who have spent their entire lives in a community of faith often take for granted the support networks that are essential to the continuation of the community. The church community provides venues for Christian young people to meet each other, to date in safe and secure settings, to learn about the responsibilities and challenges of life together. When one slips off the path, there are generally strong arms of support reaching to pull one back on.

Gays and lesbians do not benefit from these support networks. That makes the longevity of my own relationship and those of many of my gay friends and acquaintances the more miraculous. It also makes these relationships all the more precarious.

What we are facing is a classic “chicken and egg” problem. Show me a pattern of committed, long-term gay relationships, says Harold Miller, and I might change my view. To that my answer is, Give me the same support network you give your straight congregants, and I will show you same-sex relationships that are as Christ-like as the heterosexual marriages you are accustomed to.

### **Compassion and cruelty in Mennonite discourse and experience**

One of the most striking features of the essays that King has collected is the raw anger sometimes expressed, along with the hurt one sees in the

pieces by John Linscheid, Weldon Nisly, and others. This intensity of emotion may cause some to “zone out” or to seek to elevate the discussion to an intellectualized level. That is unfortunate, since healing can only come when this pain is acknowledged.

One of the many ways that this collection of essays has been emotional for me is that it reminded me of aspects of Mennonite experience that are fundamentally unkind. In this context only, I use “Mennonite” in its cultural rather than religious sense. A frequent Mennonite response to disagreement has been division, rejection, and shunning, accompanied by personal hurt and anger—as if Christ had said that the first commandment is to be loud, clear, and uncompromising about one’s belief, with love playing a secondary role.

Many of us can tell story after story of schoolyard or churchyard bullying, or of marginalization within groups of friends because we were inadequately masculine. I recall, in my Beachy Amish teenage years, my group of church friends riding up behind an Amish buggy, bumping its wheels from behind repeatedly with the car fender, and shouting out abusive language in Pennsylvania Dutch. How very frightening—and humiliating—that must have been for those inside the buggy!

A childhood friend of mine boasted about burying cats to their

**Give me the same support network you give your straight congregants, and I will show you same-sex relationships that are as Christ-like as . . . heterosexual marriages. . . .**

necks in dirt and then running over them with a lawn mower—to the general merriment of the group of teens and young adults present.

The point is not that Mennonites are better or worse than the population at large—I would not aspire to being part of the Mennonite fellowship if I didn't experience there a spirit that is fundamentally nurturing and uplifting. But there is a darker side to our culture, a tolerance of unkindness at odds with our peace mission, that is kept out of the sight and consciousness of mainstream Mennonite discourse. This darker side stands out much more prominently in the awareness of the church's gay and lesbian sons and daughters.

Of course, not all acts of unkindness are equal—it is unfair to equate an act of church discipline with mowing off the heads of cats—and some are necessary. But our cultural tolerance of occasional unkindness has sometimes manifested itself, in sublimated fashion, in the church's practices of discipline and governance. To acknowledge that these practices of discipline and governance arise out of a desire to keep the church pure, or out of simple fear and insecurity about confronting a new world, is not to diminish the hurt caused.

What strikes me most about Linshaid's and Nisly's accounts is that the anger and hurt seem tied less to the substantive outcome than to the procedural process. As a stranger to those disciplinary processes, I cannot evaluate their fairness. But the accusations raised—of procedural sleight of hand and even manipulation, of failure to

reach out adequately to the affected congregations, of breach of the church's collective covenant to dialogue—are serious enough in the context of a community of faith and love to warrant introspection and further discussion.

### **“Teaching position plus dialogue” versus “teaching position plus discipline”**

For the past 20-25 years, the church's formal positions on homosexuality have included a call for dialogue. Is that not fundamentally different from a stance of disciplining dissenters? Is not discipline—removing voting rights, removing other membership attributes, and especially outright expulsion or defrocking—per se the cutting off of dialogue?

It is distressing to see how “dialogue” has become a poisoned word for many of our lesbian and gay brothers and sisters. A historical pattern is for church leaders to maintain a semblance of unity by (1) publicly emphasizing dialogue in ambiguously drafted statements as a way of keeping all sides at the table, but then (2) not interceding when individual leaders take steps of discipline and intimidation that cut off dialogue. How can we return to “dialogue” its plain-English meaning?

### **On authority, the community, and the Anabaptist way**

One of the most beautiful aspects of the Anabaptist tradition is the centrality of the local community to religious experience. Historically, this

has been especially true in matters of church discipline—it was carried out by a community as a group on the basis of face-to-face dialogue and a long shared personal experience. Authority was not so much something imposed from above as imposed by consensus—even when the consensus found a voice in the form of the local minister and bishops, who were themselves accountable to the congregations they served.

This lack of a top-down, hierarchical structure led to a certain messiness, as congregations sometimes pushed back against bishops, individuals or congregations would leave one conference fellowship in favor of another, etc. However, it ensured that the experience of church was always local, tied to personal relationships, and that exercise of authority was principally a collective rather than top-down endeavor.

How far from that ideal we have sometimes strayed! Some contributions to King's book seem to pat the church on the back for its efficient disciplinary structure. But is that the way that is really most Christ-like, as interpreted according to the traditional Anabaptist paradigm?

Is there a chance that—like some of the mainstream Christian denominations we were once proud to be distinguished from—we have come to rely too much on a central “creed” and centralized authority structures? Does too much power lie in central church structures, whether at level of regional conference bodies or denominational Mennonite Church USA entities?

My years in the world of business and finance have given me a robust appreciation of the corrupting influence of power. A danger of centralized structures of authority is that human nature will strain against any efforts to return more power and authority to the local community. This note of pessimism is outweighed by my belief in the redeeming value of our way of peace.

### **Beyond the fear and anger: a proposal for a way forward**

How to lift ourselves out of the current muddle and move forward in a way that is respectful of all—and Christ-like? I offer some concrete steps for consideration and discussion. I have been careful to allocate responsibility for these steps equally among the church's lesbian and gay daughters and sons, on one hand, and the church leadership, on the other. I am hopeful that all Mennonite believers will see my challenges to the “church leadership” as extending to them individually.

### *For my lesbian and gay sisters and brothers: discard political-activist paradigms of change*

It is natural for those of us in the LGBTQ community (here I use the political term) to take what we know from our political struggle and apply it to the context of the church. I propose that this is a fundamentally flawed (if natural) move.

Admittedly, there are certain parallels between striving for a role in the church and, in the political arena, winning rights of non-discrimination in housing and at work, immigration



rights for domestic partners, rights of co-taxation and inheritance, hospital visitation rights, and so forth. But in my view engaging with a community of faith is fundamentally different from maneuvering the secular political process. A focus of our political struggle was awakening and channeling anger to a productive end.

The anger and flashy protest that were central to political progress are likely to be counterproductive to those engaging with the community of faith. King has it exactly right to focus on conversation, on gentle persuasion and the working of the spirit. To acknowledge this is to recognize profound implications for the methods we use to expand the church's awareness. Maintaining a constructive tone can prove most challenging where good will and honesty on both sides of the discussion do not prevail.

My hope is that the song-filled, cheerful presence of dissent that some witnessed from the Pink Menno movement at the biennial MC USA convention at Columbus, Ohio, in 2009 (where hundreds of straight and gay church members wore pink and sang in groups to show their support for inclusiveness), and the subsequent dialogue with the church, may mark a step in a positive direction.

*For church leaders: learn to know lesbian and gay daughters and sons of the church*

In King's book, accusations were raised that church leaders involved in disciplinary actions failed to meet and discuss adequately with the affected congregations. Those discussions would be a vitally important step, but

my challenge is slightly more radical still. I am challenging church leaders: Even if not confronted with this situation, seek out and learn to know the sons and daughters of the church who have learned to live with same-sex attraction. Include both those that have remained within the church and those who have left it.

Whatever our differences are, I'm sure we agree that one of your fundamental tasks as servants of God, and as stewards of the community of believers, is to minister to those in need. Your lesbian and gay sons and daughters are in need of compassion and healing. Their healing is not necessarily that of a "cure" (I believe that this is successful in a small minority of cases) but of emotional and spiritual healing in the context of accepting their genetic predisposition.

If you have young people in your watch, and if you are open to these encounters, you will almost certainly be turned to by some troubled young soul to help him or her sort out questions of sexual identity. It is incumbent on you to prepare yourself in advance for this sobering task. It would be—I propose—careless and indeed arrogant to undertake this task without having learned to know, firsthand in flesh and blood, the lives and stories of the many remarkable gays and lesbians who have grown up in your midst.

Equally importantly, if the dialogue of the church with its gay and lesbian sons and daughters is really to continue, honesty and integrity of dialogue demand no less than this personal knowledge.

*For my lesbian and gay sisters and brothers: understand that church leaders are in a very challenging situation*

For better or for worse, we have church structures—and individual church members—that demand more uniformity of belief and practice than is possible. By merely including a call for dialogue with gays and lesbians, MC USA has been labeled "pro-gay" by more than one congregation that has consequently become independent.

On the other side of the spectrum, the strong calling of some congregations to offer support to its lesbian and gay members has resulted in those congregations being expelled from their conferences. More tragically, many talented and energetic young people, both straight and gay, are simply leaving rather than engaging with a church that they perceive as bigoted and out of touch.

A church leader who is in the center on these issues may find it impossible to take any action that increases the unity of the church and minimizes further splintering or loss of members.

Many of us who are lesbian or gay feel called to seek out a place in the life of the church, and some of us even share optimism that the church will enable us to fulfill that calling. But as discussion ensues, we must keep in mind the difficult position of our church leaders today.

*For church leaders: acknowledge hurts caused and double standards propagated*

It is easy to imagine that some church leaders view gays and lesbians seeking a home in the church as expressing simple insubordination and unruliness. I challenge you: If you listen quietly to the wounded spirits of those involved in the discussion, you will hear much genuine pain and hurt. You will also come to realize that much of this pain and hurt was avoidable.

If you go back and reread your own past words in a spirit of humility and desire to learn, you may recognize how you are sometimes setting out a double standard for gays and lesbians who desire your fellowship. We are all fallible human beings—but the church is much more willing to work with the fallible natures of some than with those of others.

For healing to occur and a healthy discussion to continue, it will be important for church leaders to acknowledge that some of the pain and anger impeding dialogue today has been caused by the church—and has been caused unnecessarily.

*For my gay and lesbian brothers and sisters: propose an approach to ethical living consistent with a pietistic tradition*

King's collection of essays contained a challenge to the lesbian and gay community: Show us what a

**Show us what a holistic life of same-sex conjugal commitment looks like. Is there a proposed standard of Christ-like behavior that our gay and lesbian sons and daughters are prepared to adhere to?**

holistic life of same-sex conjugal commitment looks like. Is there a proposed standard of Christ-like behavior that our gay and lesbian sons and daughters are prepared to adhere to?

To my knowledge, this challenge has largely gone unanswered. Yet it is a fair challenge. It is incumbent on us, the gay and lesbian sons and daughters of the church, to answer that call. In doing so, we cannot ignore the church's expectations that a life of holiness implies a different standard than that which applies to human society generally. We must recognize that we arise out of a pietistic tradition and are defining a place for ourselves within that tradition.

*For church leaders: return discernment to the congregational level*

On this troubled and difficult topic of integrating gays and lesbians into the church politic, I would challenge the church leadership to return discernment to where it conceptually belongs in the Anabaptist tradition—to the level of the local congregation. This is especially appropriate with the inclusiveness issue, not least because it involves flesh-and-blood feeling and life experience, which is a phenomenon inadequately dealt with long-distance, in bureaucratic fashion, by church leaders.

**Will the church really be better served if its use of top-down disciplinary techniques leads to a new progressive conference . . . at odds with and not in communion with the Mennonite Church USA. . . ?**

There is a danger that, if the central leadership of the Mennonite Church USA and especially its various constituent conferences continue to take a quite inflexible across-the-board approach to the issue, we will see the rise of a counter-church that reflects a more nuanced understanding of human sexuality and holiness.

Will the church really be better served if its use of top-down disciplinary techniques leads to a new progressive conference of urban and other open-minded Mennonites, at odds with and not in communion with the Mennonite Church USA—or a deep divide between inclusive and exclusive conferences? Is it not possible for our church leadership to nudge the church toward greater acceptance of having difficult matters of faith and discipline being resolved at the local level?

The central lesson of my experience with the Frankfurt Mennonite Church is the richness of experience that can result if a congregation—completely devoted to leading lives of devotion and integrity—embraces diversity as an expression of God's love. I hope other sons and daughters of the church will come to witness what I experienced there.

—Ray Fisher, 47, lives in New York City and Barto, Pennsylvania.



## Finding God

Mary Alice Hostetter

**W**hen I was five years old, God was all about love. He took care of the birds and made the sunshine; he had fireflies blink off and on as if by magic. He gave me parents who made sure I had food and clothes, brothers and sisters to play with. He let me walk barefoot through puddles in summer.

When I was 12, God started laying down a lot of rules. With a whole firmament to run, he took time to enforce rules about fashion details, about entertainment. He wanted women to wear seams in their stockings, capes over their dresses.

He did not want those dresses to be red, even though he could do red, with his geraniums in the flower boxes, American beauty roses in the flower beds, and beautiful ripe tomatoes all over the field. You'd think with planets to spin and seasons to cycle, you'd think he'd have better things to do than damn me to hell for not wanting to look different from everyone else. You wouldn't think he'd have time to watch in case I sneaked out to a movie. I didn't know what I had done to make him so angry.

When I was 25, I knew I was doomed. My church attendance was sporadic, and God had to know about the gin and tonics. I tried to be good but knew it couldn't count for much, rules being what they were.

It wasn't that I didn't care about God. I just didn't understand him and knew there was no way I could follow all of those rules. So many of them didn't make sense to me.

When I was 36, it felt like it was my time to be punished. I believed that good things happened to good people. I was kind. I was generous. I was responsible. No reason I should be the one singled out, but I was. Was it punishment? Did the rules really matter? I read the books and tried to understand why bad things happen to good people. I went inside. I searched outside. I hid from the darkness. I went into the darkness. I survived the darkness and came back, often grateful for the journey.

When I was 50, God started pop-

ping up everywhere. I found her in the silence, in the music, in the laughter of friends, in the words on the pages, in the memories, in the ever-changing trees, in the songs of the birds, in the

beauty of wood and rock and glass. I found God again in the twinkling firefly and in the eyes of a child as she chased the firefly.

**“When I was five . . . , God was all about love. . . . When I was 36, it felt like it was my time to be punished. . . . When I was 50. . . .”**

—*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.*



## “Really, Michael King, Really”

*A Conversation with a Mennonite Unbeliever*

Michael A. King

**A**fter *The Mennonite* (Feb. 3, 2009) published my column on “Will You Hold Me as I Held You?” it was reprinted in *DreamSeeker Magazine* (Spring 2009). Between both outlets, that column generated more than average response, but none more substantial than those from a reader who turned out to be a Mennonite no longer able to believe in God. I found his feedback moving, provocative, and worth pondering.

In the midst of that conversation arrived an article by atheist Alan Soffin (now printed after this one). Add to all this the fact that I myself have long wrestled with how we confront life's shadows yet maintain faith in God (wrestling from which “Hold Me” emerged), and I became convinced that others might value the opportunity to experience the candid engagements of my unbelieving friend with issues of faith and doubt.

Thus with his permission—but with the understanding he shall remain anonymous—I share below our exchange of letters, one from him, then my response, and finally one more from him to me plus a

copy of a letter he sent to a friend. The letters are reproduced as written except for light editing to fit Cascadia style, to trim away occasional wording, or to mask Anonymous.

Dear Michael King,

You have, in your “Will You Hold Me As I Held You” portrayed so eloquently, so very eloquently the mystery and the paradox of human existence. Magnificent. I have read it three or four times in the last three or four days.

After years of living here and living there, of considerable travel, of reading and studying too much in the sage of Western civilization, of shoveling dirt and grass on my parents graves in a futile effort to gain closure, and now watching and holding and playing with new grass—two grandkids—and contemplating my own final withering—well, your words, your language, your expressions, were as if out of my own well.

However, I am surprised that *The Mennonite* printed your article. Although most beautifully written and expressed, it is at heart a very depressing consideration of the ultimate meaning (or non-meaning) of life. The one factor that allowed *The Mennonite* to devote a page to your inspiration is your occasional reference to “God,” the “grass that fadeth not and that shall endure forever” and the corresponding final reference to the “love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting.”

Come now, Michael King, what if there is no God? What if there is no “love of the Lord from everlasting to everlasting?” Despite how often we repeat the phrase and hope against hope that such a reality is not just more grass? What in our “experience” testifies to those “truths” as eloquently as our “experience” testifies to the “grass” metaphor?

And perhaps the most major question of your article. . . . What difference in the final analysis would a “God” make, would the “love of a Lord from everlasting to everlasting make”?? Would such a “God” and such a “love” make the grass which now withereth, flourish again? Does the repetition of those phrases fulfill our deepest need to believe “it just ain’t so”? Is “God” and the “love” merely an extremely powerful antidote to the illusion?

Your entire article is based on experience, the ultimate arbiter of reality. All who read it will immediately identify. The separation will occur in your reference to “God” to “his hands” to his everlasting love . . . really, Michael King, which fork do you really take? Really . . .

Sincerely yours, Anonymous

Dear Anonymous:

Many thanks for your provocative response to my “Will You Hold Me” column.

I find your thoughts quite insightful and thought-provoking. I’m not sure to what extent you might see them as affirming versus critical, but I

**“Come now, Michael King, what if there is no God? . . . Really, Michael King, which fork do you really take? Really?”**

myself experience them as accurately aimed except that maybe (though I’m not sure, since I’m not positive what your own thinking here is) I arrive at a slightly different destination while taking much the same path you seem to be pointing toward.

To elaborate: You seem to be highlighting the possibility that God is tacked on to a perspective that finally implies non-meaning/non-God. I don’t really disagree. I intended to push pretty hard on the bleak end of things. I believe Mennonites/Christians tend to be far too quick to offer pious faith statements without confronting the data that seems to call for different conclusions, and my column reflects that, as you rightly discern. I found, in fact, that I was still not quite done going that route when my most recent column came due. See what you think of my continuation of the theme when it appears in *The Mennonite* June 2 [and in *DreamSeeker Magazine* Summer 2009].

Where it’s possible we arrive at a different destination is that—as perhaps my forthcoming column elaborates—I don’t see confronting the difficulty of integrating God with our more troubling experiences as thereby invalidating the possibility of God. So for me to include God in the column was not simply to tack on an antidote for an illusion but to long for God to be more than illusion.

Am I sure about this? No. That’s why the column does in fact keep God at some distance. I don’t want God in there too quickly making everything fine. It’s not fine a lot of the

time. One Mennonite scholar sent an e-mail describing himself as “a 90-year old, wondering how someone as much younger than I am as you are, can understand the elderly plight that well.” Something like that was what I was trying to get at. Getting God integrally into that is a hard-won challenge, and probably one thing you perceptively pick up on in my column is that I’m not sure how to do it, even as I think it’s worth the quest.

Question: the “Hold Me” column is reprinted in *DreamSeeker Magazine*, which I edit. I think your letter would make an excellent response piece. How would you feel about having it published?

Thanks again for taking the time to respond so thoughtfully and carefully, Anonymous.

Dear Michael King,

To begin with, may I again identify the beauty of your expression in “Will You Hold Me?” Very very well done. I loved it . . . and certainly identified with your questions. . . .

Now to continue, of course, you can use my response as you see fit. But without using my name. I have an inordinate fear of revealing how very secular my thought has become—in lieu of my early experience where every kind of doubt or deviation was a certain sign to damnation and worthy of hell-fire.

And even among my friends here in the Midwest, doubts and secular thoughts are not condemned, just merely written off as irrelevant. And being 75 is already being sufficiently irrelevant!! And so I am very cautious

in opening up or revealing any thought bordering on unorthodoxy. I have no need of looking for unnecessary trouble. It would be the theological version of “coming out.”

So upon reading today your May 13 letter—I had to chuckle how well I had camouflaged my real intent!!! But your “suspicions” were well-founded—they are real!! Right on!!

But even in your May 13 letter, you continue to use the word *God*. Precisely. what does your use of this or these letters—g-o-d—mean? Suppose there is a “God.” What does he-she-it do? What does he-she-it bring to the table, to the conversation? That has relevance for you, for me? What are we looking for, searching for that thing, to which this g-o-d somehow seems to be the answer? Why do you have a need to talk about “God” and what “good” enters your life if and when you do so?

When I have a bolt without a nut, the bolt is useless. Without relevance, without meaning. So I look for a device, a nut, a special nut that will fit the bolt thread and thereby make the bolt relevant, meaningful, helpful. What does this so-called “God” do? Is he something like the above “nut”? I think we know what our problem is (we do?) and so just how does that “thing” that “being” supply the answer as the “nut” does for the “bolt.”

I confess, I am at a loss (a total loss) when I hear people use that word because there is nothing in my experience that bridges epistemologically the gap between “me” and “that thing out there or in here or wherever, whatever it is, is.” I give up. I just roll my

eyes and exit the field of discussion!!

Maybe we should again read “Waiting for Godot” by Samuel Beckett? Have you?

Yes, I am certainly waiting for your writing delving further into the “problem”—the “guest”—the “search.”

Sincerely yours, Anonymous.

**D**ear Friend of Anonymous,

I owe you a very appreciative and grateful “thank you” for calling this evening—and the small group an apology for not being “present” on Wednesday evenings. The least I can do and should have done is to explain (not excuse) my absence.

The same should be said about my absence from Midwest Congregation. So here goes. . . .

I just don’t find Midwest Congregation intellectually challenging. I used to come because it was very interesting to observe how so-called “religious” folk conduct themselves in what is their once-a-week religious ritual. I finally got bored with the Sunday morning “verbal displays” (called sermons, teachings, etc.) and the lack of intellectual honesty (as I perceived it) in the ensuing discussions.

And I have to admit—I find the 10:30 Sunday morning CBS Schief-fer program and especially the 11:00 NBC “Meet the Press” with Gregory so much more exciting and stimulating. Real problems, real subjects . . . pro and con, give and take. I love it.

But also, I loved (and admire) the article in *The Mennonite* by Michael King on “Will You Hold Me . . .” and

so I wrote him a letter asking questions (which I thought pertinent!) on his article. Our dialogue was rather interesting.

I miss, I need, I love that kind of interaction. It really begins with experiencing myself as a mystery, even to myself. And to then viewing all those other homo sapiens on two legs wandering to and fro in the same fog (the mystery of life) as I am and wondering what exactly is constitutive of their mystery. . . . Who are they? I? We? What’s going on here?

In conclusion, I just read the June 8 *Newsweek*, page 30, on “Let’s talk about God,” and as I told you, I asked [name deleted] to order Terry Eagleton’s *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* and Robert Wright’s *The Evolution of God*. I become very excited (inwardly agitated!) when I read such articles and can hardly wait until those books arrive. It’s almost like an intellectual and spiritual orgasm . . . they speak to my innermost needs and questions.

On the other hand (on the other side of me!), this coming Sunday (and the following Sundays), I’m going to Midwest Town to sing in the “Old Rugged Cross” Church the “old-fashioned” gospel songs—the ones I grew up with—the ones whose theology is now as far from me as day is from night—but the ones who also exert a tremendous hold on my emotional life. I used to be the pianist in our

church . . . and that included the men’s chorus, the revival meetings, altar calls, etc., etc.—you name it.

They became so deeply ingrained in my psyche that to “cast them out” of my mind (to have them “exorcised”) would leave me at the age of 76

rather emotionally barren, destitute, a shell. I so much look forward to singing them—but only with an ample supply of Kleenex on hand.

I hope you will understand. It’s a world I no longer occupy and find impossible to return to. I often ask myself, in introspective moments,

where and when and how did this journey happen? Who was the one who opened and cleared such a path and that therefore, according to the Good Book, should be cast into the lake of fire?? What a mystery! Hence the fog in which I wander!

Sincerely,  
Anonymous

—*Michael A. King, Telford, Pennsylvania, is publisher, Cascadia Publishing House LLC; editor, DreamSeeker Magazine; and a pastor and speaker. His unbelieving Mennonite friend’s history includes the post-World War II Mennonite service experiences in Europe through which he saw the ravages of war, including the Holocaust, and found it difficult indeed to square such experiences with God.*



# An Atheist Finds “God” Yet Not God

Alan Soffin

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by. —Robert Frost, “The Road Less Traveled”*

## I. Away from “God”

The road that led me into philosophical theology had an utterly conventional first leg. Born in Queens, New York—the only son of a middle class Jewish family—I received the usual unearned maternal adoration, tempered, however, by my father’s firm belief in sarcastic child development. It was another century. The Great Depression was still waiting for the Second World War to relieve it.

I recall tossing nickels wrapped in paper to itinerant violinists and sellers of old clothes in the alley two floors below. My world was sidewalks, empty lots, and boisterous play. Girls were alien. It was a world of simple rules, some counseling honesty, others prejudice. It was a world in which prayer was the means by which reality might be overruled.

Religion meant respectability and was (*sotto voce*) the only way to understand what we were doing on earth. “God” was the coin of exclamation on the street

and of hope in every home. Yet God was nowhere to be seen on the boulevard.

Plainly not near the Blessed Sacrament school. There students formed the gauntlet a Jewish child would run on the way to P.S. 148—having failed to disown his ancestors for “killing Christ.” Still, I accepted God the way I accepted Franklin Delano Roosevelt—as a distant father one could call upon in desperate situations. (Though I confess to testing God, to making youthful bargains with God, to being angry when he didn’t hold up his end.)

By my teen years, the idea of “God” had been buried under facts. People who were rotten prospered. Good people suffered. Pets were run over by cars. People implored God to furnish help, from ending polio to killing Hitler. But God wasn’t listening or else didn’t care. God’s ancient visitations clashed with his contemporary absence. The child who remarked on such things “had a lot to learn.” The synagogue was filled with men who had, apparently, learned what was needed.

Facts continued to accumulate. The Bible had been as often thumped to justify as to condemn the use of slaves. Religion’s fabric of compassion had been regularly stained by presumption, persecution, and violence. No party to a war ever lacked God’s support. The Sermon on the Mount seemed confined to the Mount.

**By my teen years, the idea of “God” had been buried under facts. People who were rotten prospered. Good people suffered. Pets were run over by cars.**

## II. Away from all religion

At 17, freighted equally with baggage, hope, and ignorance, I left for Illinois. Behind me lay a realm of tradition and identity; before me the startling blackness of Midwestern soil, the openness of college—the promise and mystery of things I did not know. The first year was (of course) self-concerned—a mélange of grades, credits, tests, friends, and girls—save for a running dispute over God with a fellow dishwasher and his Newman Club priest.

But, providentially, a great university prevailed. The astonishing reach of human thought and the power of human art came in upon me like a tide. A course was set that, decades later, would return me to theology—though of that far off rendezvous I then had no idea.

My several interests came to rest in education and philosophy. I had not lost the seed of “ultimate concern.” By reflecting on human reflection, philosophy offered a way to understand what human beings are. And, if its insights could inform education, the ends and means of social life might be profoundly bettered.

A path seemed open to the Good (a prospect made more real by hearing, for the first time, Bach’s B Minor Mass and—over a tinny car radio—Beethoven’s Fifth). Timeless things might be realized. What I had yet to learn was that the culture of philosophy, like that of Queens, could be

blinker by tradition despite its thirst for truth.

### III. The God that failed: “Seeing is believing”

If the God of my neighborhood was *tradition*, the God of my graduate school was *experience*. “Experience” had (in philosophy’s dominant, “empirical” tradition), a special definition. It meant “*sense experience*” or “*sense-observation*”—the bedrock of scientific testing. Science had changed the world. This was not lost on philosophers. For empiricists, the world as science sees it was the *real* world. Science was the standpoint from which human life must be described and understood. Yet, in time I had my doubts.

They first arose upon reading David Hume, the seminal empiricist. Hume could find no beauty in the *circle*. The eye perceives a line, but nothing else. Not being sense-perceptible, beauty was *imagined*. It was not real—it was not *in the world*.

But had I not seen beauty in paintings? Did it make sense that on Monday the Louvre’s collection is beautiful but on Tuesday, maybe not—depending on the mood of its visitors? And what of a painting’s *warmth* or a poem’s *depth*? Neither quality was sense-observable. Still, the minds I admired favored Hume. I thought I must be wrong.

Art was not alone beneath empiricism’s ax. The *moral quality* of acts was not observable. The senses could not detect “cruelty” or “goodness”; hence, they were only “in our heads.” But, if moral terms referred to nothing *in the*

*world*, moral truths could not be learned *from experience*! Yet, all around me, people cited features of actions as good or bad *in themselves*, (as though experience *did* provide moral evidence).

I found myself, uncomfortably, closer to religion than philosophy. Religion held that values and norms were real. Their existence was not *up to us*. However, that was because they were *up to God*—they were expressions of His will. I demurred. Surely torture would be immoral *even if* God did not exist. But, without God, what basis was there for norms or values?

A stint in the army offered a break. When I returned, philosophy had turned to “ordinary language analysis.” I hoped this might challenge empiricism. Instead, the analysts, by and large, took ordinary language to the woodshed. What people *thought* they meant by terms like *good* was wrong. What they really meant was revealed when their statements were tested against (yes) the empiricist view of “experience.”

Analysts said *language misleads us* into thinking, say, *beauty* is real. The sentence, “this is beautiful” has the same *form* as the sentence, “this is aluminum.” We then suppose that both sentences state things about the world. But *beauty* (and all other evaluative terms) has no reference in the world. So, why do we use words like *beautiful* or *good*?

The explanation was that we use words like “beautiful” or “good” not to *describe* something but to *do* something. We use them to perform an action. So, when we say, “slavery is evil”

we are not describing slavery; we are just expressing a negative attitude to affect others’ behavior.

The final blow came when (empirically-based) “postmodern” philosophies declared that knowledge was illusory. I suppose I should not have been surprised. Science can’t distinguish *knowing* from *believing*. But it was absurd. We all *knew* we’d had a Civil War, *knew* atoms exist, *knew* the sun lights the Earth—*knew* more than we can ever say—and (for that matter) *knew* it is wrong to jail the innocent.

If I reach for my key, you have (physical) evidence that I *believe* the door is locked. But no behavior of mine can tell you that I *know* the door is locked. Knowing transcends the physical.

Later I would find, in *knowing*, my first glimpse of a genuine mystery.

The empirical “God” was dead. Now, two explanations of reality had failed. One had said that only what the senses could test was real—the other that, in reality, the world was the manifestation of a *will*. But why ever mount such explanations? Was the world (as we find it in experience) too astounding to accept? In that question lay the clue to rethinking religion.

### IV. Dorothy: “There’s no place like home.”

Religion and empirical philosophy had sought to establish what we were by *explanation*. What con-founded them was the presence of

standards, values, and moral and aesthetic qualities that together prompt the *uniquely human* question, “What ought I do?”

Animals *calculate* how to get what they want. We *inquire* into things for *guidance*. We contemplate home decorations. We discuss our treatment of each other. We draw up statements of rights and obligations. We develop mathematical proofs, scientific tests, critical reviews, ethical systems, critical thinking, ideals of love and commitment.

But where do the standards and values that guide us come from? Either they are independent aspects of the universe, no less possessed of their own character than mass or energy, or they only *appear* as such to us. “They simply can’t be aspects of an (otherwise) *physical* universe,” said the traditional theorists. But what did they think true, instead?

Theism believed that an unembodied agent, unconstrained by any pre-existing rules or laws, created what exists by willing it out of nothing—empiricism believed that the standards and qualities we live by and for are psychological illusions projected onto the world by processes within the brain. To me these notions were more incredible than the problem they purported to solve.

It struck me, then, that what these theorists could not believe about life when they *observed* it was what in fact they never doubted when they *lived* it.

**It struck me, then, that what these theorists could not believe about life when they observed it was what in fact they never doubted when they lived it.**

The denizens of my old neighborhood may have explained moral rules as, simply, messages from a God who was “*beyond* human understanding.” But so little did they think moral standards were opaque orders from beyond (or merely *attitudes*), they had no qualms about explaining what God did. If a tragedy occurred, God was helping us to grow. If an avalanche killed innocents, then God allowed it for a greater good. In short, an unfathomable God whose “word” was law, was *subject* to moral considerations.

But contradictoriness was not confined to Queens. Empirical philosophers, too, lived in neighborhoods. In academe, it was *heinous* to take credit for another’s ideas, *cowardly* to obscure the flaws in one’s argument, *reprehensible* to fail

a student out of pique, and flat out *wrong* to falsify data, or advocate a theory for money. Yet—in empirical theory—none of these actions were intrinsically *bad*; they were just *disapproved*.

“Back in Kansas,” no one honestly believed standards were “psychological,” “useful”—or simply “up to God.” Whether they were working in a lab or advising those they loved, right and wrong, true and false were encountered. The standards and the qualities that governed us were *real*. Not sense-observation, not messages from another world, but responsible living—*consequentiality*—was the locus of what makes us human. I had

been wrong. God was very much on the boulevard. I just hadn’t recognized “his face.”

### V. Finding “God” not God

God and ordinary life came together. The one idea common to all “religion” is that the meaning of life comes from something outside us. It is precisely this that empirical philosophies deny. For them, the meaning of our lives comes entirely *from within* us, not *to us* (from our physiology, our genetics, our glands—the lot!)

These opposed “logics” of meaning were, I thought, the real source of the “warfare between science and religion” and between “religious” and “modern” societies. And the fight would continue, if I was right, because neither tradition could be-

lieve that we were in the presence of the ultimate mystery, and that, in an important sense, we were already in heaven and had met our maker.

I do not speak “poetically.” Poetic statements can be literally false. Religious statements must be literally true (God must *exist*, so to speak). If the idea of “God” is the idea of a *creator* and the *guarantor* of whatever meaning our existence may have, then the moral and aesthetic qualities that guide us, and the standards of rationality, morality, and decency that command us, do for us what “God” is supposed to do. They create and guarantee the meaning of our thoughts and actions.

As “God” is, for theists, *the law-giver*, they are the “givers” of law. In the end, I concluded that the idea of “God” is the idea of the *necessity* that characterizes whatever is *real* (morally, aesthetically, logically, physically). “God” is this great, multi-faceted “presence.”

“How,” you may ask, “can you speak of *objective* (independently authoritative) standards and values in the same breath as “God?”

“Because,” I answer, “the existence in a silent universe of invisible bearers of authority is a mystery—a mystery no less deep than the mystery of physical existence itself.”

I take a cue from Native American religion. Judeo-Christian-Muslims tend to think themselves apart from the (physical) world around us; we suppose ourselves a special creation. But the fact is that we are molecular, *and in every way but our thinking*, we are “governed” by the same laws as the stars from which we come. Is it then a “speculation” to say, “We are the universe thinking”?

I do not explain. I endeavor only to make us “look homeward” and to

echo the philosopher, Charles Sanders Peirce, when he said “do not doubt in your philosophy what you do not doubt in your heart.”

Oh yes, “God” gives us purpose. What is it we can do that “nature’s” creatures and objects cannot do—save glimpse and realize that which is good or right? And if the good and right is in the universe, it is we who—while we exist—can realize what “calls” out to be realized. This is what it is to love the world, for to

**To love is to give oneself to the “other,” to help what is other than oneself realize what it can be. That is, perhaps, theism’s idea of self-fulfillment in the service of God. And, at bottom, it is right.**

love is to give oneself to the “other,” to help what is other than oneself realize what it can be. That is, perhaps, theism’s idea of self-fulfillment in the service of God. And, at bottom, it is right.

—Alan Soffin, *Doylestown, Pennsylvania, numbers among his interests philosophy, religion, filmmaking, writing, and music. Although an atheist, Soffin seeks nevertheless to value religion and is awaiting publication of Rethinking Religion (Cascadia, 2010).*





## My Two Cents on a Flat Stomach

Deborah Good

**I** begin this column with a brief disclaimer: As a society and as individuals, our relationships with our bodies, with food, and with physical activity are fascinating and complicated—relationships I am in no way qualified to address in just 1,500 words. So please, read with the understanding that this is not a comprehensive treatment of the subject but a somewhat feisty response to my day-to-day experience as a woman in the world.

Those “flat stomach” ads have been getting on my nerves recently. You know the ones I mean. They occasionally show up alongside the news story I’m reading online, or they line up ubiquitously beside me at the grocery store checkout, trying to sell this or that “key” to weight loss and abs-glory.

If I think about it too much, I actually get downright pissed off. This is in part because of the amount of time, energy, and synaptic activity that women spend on stomachs instead of on more creative or interesting or world-bettering causes.

It is also because I like myself. And I am tired of being told not to.

In the preface to her play, *The Good Body* (Villard, 2004), Eve Ensler writes, “When a group of ethnically diverse, economically disadvantaged women in the United States was recently asked about the one thing they would change in their lives if they could, the majority of these women said they would lose weight.”

Really? What if the majority instead said they wanted to read more, or to be more thoughtful neighbors, or to join the fight to end hunger? What if they said they hoped to climb mountains and try out skydiving, or to go back to school for astrophysics? I personally think the world would be a far more interesting place.

“Maybe I identify with these women,” Ensler goes on, “because I have bought into the idea that if my stomach were flat, then I would be good, and I would be safe. I would be protected. I would be accepted, admired, important, loved.”

From Mary Pipher’s *Reviving Ophelia* to Carole Pateman’s “Sexual Contract,” this topic has been addressed again and again; I don’t pretend I have anything particularly new to tell you. Countless voices, particularly in the past forty years, have analyzed, narrated, argued, and screamed it out: Women face undue societal pressure to look a certain way. The power and recognition we do receive is much more tied up in our physical appearance than it is for men. The di-

eting and exercise industries have made their multi-billion-dollar riches by encouraging women to (a) look in the mirror and then (b) decide that they do not measure up.

**P**erhaps the reason I can still get so worked up about the magazines in the checkout line is because the problem still persists to such astounding degrees *in spite* of these critical voices.

To women I say this: If you love going to the gym, by all means, go. If the elliptical machine makes your face light up and your heart go pitter-patter, do not let me stop you. Vigorous exercise is good for us for many reasons. (The soccer field is my preferred venue.) But if

your gym membership is motivated by self-dislike and is part of an ongoing quest for abs-glory, I suggest you pack it into the bottom of your dresser drawer and find something else to do.

Even *Time* magazine is onboard with this. Their August 17, 2009 issue reported on research that suggests vigorous exercise (like the kind we get at the gym) is actually more likely to gain us a few pounds than trim them off because, well, we get hungry afterwards and tend to eat more than we would have otherwise. According to the article, some researchers believe that we would more likely lose weight if we worked to increase our activity levels overall, in the small, hour-to-hour kind of way.

**If your gym membership is motivated by self-dislike and is part of an ongoing quest for abs-glory, I suggest you pack it into the bottom of your dresser drawer and find something else to do.**

In other words, we should be taking the stairs, not the elevator. (It's also amazing how much low-intensity exercise I get simply by *running*—sometimes literally running—late so often.)

Let's face it. It is a little absurd when we walk right out our front steps into our cars and drive 20 minutes to the gym, only to run in place for 45 minutes, and then repeat the drill in reverse. Here's an idea: Start a garden instead. The digging and weeding will give you the low-level exercise researchers are now promoting, and the produce will complement a healthy diet.

Another idea: Walk or bike to get around. That way you'll be increasing your physical activity while getting wherever it is you're going, *and* saving the environment while you're at it. What better way to help us feel good about ourselves than by lifting one hand from our handlebars to give global warming the proverbial middle finger?

**P**lease do not misread this column as “Deborah's secret to a flat stomach.” My purpose is definitely not to suggest whether and how we should exercise in order to lose weight. Nor is my point that we should care less about our health; indeed we should all strive to eat well and be active.

The point is that we would be better off to care less about being perfect and thin. The point is that *women do*

*not need flat stomachs*—a goal that is pretty ridiculous considering that we come in such different shapes and body types. The point is that men—and I will not be gentle about this—need to stop @!#\$-ing making comments about women's bodies. And the real point, of course, is that life is more enjoyable and more fun when we accept ourselves as we are, including our flabby bits and imperfect pieces.

**The point is that we would be better off to care less about being perfect and thin. The point is that women do not need flat stomachs. . . .**

Many people groups have had to learn self-love against forces much greater than my middle-class, white self will probably ever experience. In one of my very favorite passages—an excerpt from Toni Morrison's *Beloved*—an elderly African American woman whom people called “Baby Suggs, holy” sat on a rock in the middle of a clearing, and, speaking like a preacher to her people, urged them amid all who “despise” their flesh to love their hands, flesh, and faces. “You got to love it,” Baby Suggs preaches, “*you!*” (p. 88).

A friend recently told me a story. “I went to a baseball game the other week,” she said and paused. “Where I almost cried!”

It was an independent professional league game, relatively small and intimate. “At one point,” she went on, “they invited all the kids in the stadium down onto the field to run around the bases. And for like ten straight minutes, we watched these kids run around those bases for all

they were worth. All kinds of kids, different sizes and shapes, all smiling and just *running*. And I just kept watching their faces and thinking about how beautiful it was, and I almost cried.”

She laughed, a little amazed at herself. And I laughed too because I could picture the scene: sun beaming down on toothy grins, little arms pumping, a crowd of happy children, small, medium, and large, just tearing around the baseball diamond—not because they wanted to be thin and perfect but because for them, in that moment, there was absolutely nothing else in the world that mattered except for running around those bases.

I have decided to carry this image with me—of children running, fully present in themselves and in love with what their bodies are capable of. I wish we could all learn to love our bodies with this same carefree vigor.

*You got to love it, preaches Baby Suggs. You!*

*A postscript: I print this column well-aware that the topic of women and body image is probably over-played, over-dis-*

*cussed, and over-done. But I print it anyway, because the statistics are so staggering (figures vary, but some researchers, for instance, have found that 78 percent of girls are unhappy with their bodies by the time they reach 18).*

*I print it anyway, convinced that what Mary Pipher calls “lookism” is still so pervasive in our society that it is worth another thousand words of critique. Evidence: Several years ago, I wrote a column on a topic not very different from this one, and the column generated more feedback from readers than any column of mine before or since—a chorus of frustrated women calling for a different kind of world. May we all strive for it. And, men, yes, we really, really need you in this fight too.*

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# Loving Those Who Get Married and Die

Renee Gehman

**A** knot has been tied, a family reconfigured. A little sister: Married!

It came as no surprise; in fact, it was expected long before it came to pass. Months of preparations and countless discussions of wedding and marriage details carried us along to the Big Day and became as casual a part of life as toothbrushing.

Yet as natural as the idea of a marriage may become, little can be done to prepare oneself for the swell of emotions that ensue when one sees her little sister—her *only* sister—gliding toward the front of the church, looking surprisingly grown up, strikingly beautiful. His name is now hers, his house now hers also. And now the place we together called home for twenty-something years is only one person (namely, me) shy of empty nestedness.

As my sister's maid of honor for the wedding, several traditional duties were bestowed upon me along the way. On the actual wedding day, most of my work seemed to revolve around dress maintenance. The two main responsibilities are to keep the train of the dress

spread as photogenically as possible at all times and to prepare the bustle between ceremony and reception.

So I learned how to bustle, which, for possible readers-unacquainted-with-bustling, is a precise art of matching color-coded hooks and eyes to arrange a long dress into a practical, dance-ready length while still giving high regard to aesthetics and symmetry.

**A**nother, perhaps more significant, task was to compose a speech to accompany a toast to the couple at the reception (*and here at last is where we begin to approach the topic indicated in the title*). Coming up with something to say was not a problem. I typed it all out and then discovered upon printing that it was three pages long, single-spaced. No, the primary trouble I had with composing this speech was that, no matter how I worded the thing, I could not seem to make it into something that could not also be spoken at a funeral.

I told stories about our relationship. I painted pictures of her in scenes that, to me, described who she was as a person. I included humor and sentimentality, words of praise and words of love. If it weren't for the part about her meeting Andrew, and then the part about his qualities, my wedding toast would have sounded suspiciously eulogaic.

As I wrote the speech, I kept having pesky flashbacks to a funeral I had attended just a few weeks earlier, for

an elderly man. At the service, prepared comments were made by a group of family and friends who each covered one topic or aspect of the man's life: Him as a person. Him as a working man. Him as a man of faith. Him as a family man. In this interesting, comprehensive way, stories were told, idiosyncracies were acknowledged, and the man was celebrated and honored for the whole of his person. Love for him was conveyed as collectively and sincerely as perhaps it ever had been.

**The apparent fine line between wedding toast and eulogy I seemed to be happening upon was at first unsettling for me.**

The apparent fine line between wedding toast and eulogy I seemed to be happening upon was at first unsettling for me. Why should material for a happy wedding speech also serve as appropriate fodder for a funeral speech?? The more I reflect, however, the more natural and . . . acceptable . . . the connection has become for me.

The connection occurs in what loss does to heighten the awareness of love. I imagine the best days for having your best qualities praised and your worst qualities spoken of endearingly are the days of your wedding and your funeral. Suddenly little things like the person leaving a messy bathroom all the time become endearing to the point of tears of sorrow over the loss of this grievance.

This was the quarrel I often had with my sister, about the only part of her leaving home I looked forward to. Yet as the days till the wedding got fewer and fewer, so increased the urge

to say to my sister: *No, you can't leave! You must stay here and leave your clothes on the bathroom floor! Who will leave their clothes on the bathroom floor for me to chuck out angrily?! How can you take this role away from me?!* Maybe if I die before Michael King (or maybe at my wedding, because that is less morbid) he will speak fondly of my consistent tardiness with submitting articles.

There certainly is something about losing people that makes us appreciate them more. This is nothing new under the sun. It's even biblical. Jacob runs away from murderously angry Esau, only to reunite years later when all is water under the bridge and Esau is just glad to see his brother again. Joseph, too, has brother issues in his youth, but after years apart the brothers have gotten over what irritated them about him, and they miss him.

And what about the prodigal son? Here is a prime example of how arbitrary a loved one's mistakes can be-

come when there is some form of estrangement and, eventually, reunion.

**I**f there were a moral for this reflection on loving those who get married and die it would seem to be, "If you feel underappreciated by loved ones, leave periodically," but that is not quite what I want to say, so maybe I want to avoid moral statements here.

Or perhaps we can take something from the statement of some reminders that are by no means groundbreaking but are, I think, good to remember. Consider your loved ones regularly. Make a habit of reflecting on what it is about them that you cherish, including the irritants that will become fondly missed quirks. Then tell them, before they get married, if you can, or if not, try to manage it before they die.

—*Renee Gehman, Souderton, Pennsylvania, is assistant editor, DreamSeeker Magazine; and high school teacher.*



## Before Reality TV: "The Truman Show" and "Pleasantville"

Dave Greiser

**S**ince I first began writing for *DreamSeeker Magazine*, the use of commercial films in churches has risen dramatically. A glance across the Internet (especially the blogosphere) reveals a wide array of Christian "theologians" of film, Christian film critics, not to mention Christian cultural commentators and critics. There are whole books on preaching that explain how preachers might use films as the subject matter for theological reflection in their sermons.

My original intention for this column was not to write movie reviews—much less sermons built on movies—but to comment on those films that contributed to the dialogue Western culture seems to be having about God and meaning. I was (and am) fascinated by the way "secular" culture continues telling, reshaping, appreciating, and often subverting the biblical narrative.

But how fair is it to apply theological questions to a movie? Am I reaching for what isn't there when I try to observe theological themes in a film? Am I guilty of a misuse of the art?

In preparing to teach a sophomore-level theology course recently, I revisited these questions as I watched two of the films that first excited me about the potential of relating theology to film, “The Truman Show” and “Pleasantville,” which were released just over ten years ago. Both films won excellent critical reviews and were widely praised for their perceptive social commentaries and cultural critique. I would argue that both films, in telling their stories, knowingly applied symbols and concepts from the Christian narrative. For those who haven’t seen these films, here’s a short synopsis of both.

**“The Truman Show”:** Truman Burbank is a resident of Seahaven Island, a sunshiny community with sunshiny people where Truman lives with his attractive wife, his faithful friends, and his comfortable job. Truman’s world is for the most part utterly predictable. The same people say and do the same things, at the same times, day after day.

What Truman has not discovered is that, from the moment of his birth, his entire life has been the subject of a 24/7 TV show. Everyone on Seahaven Island, except Truman, is an actor in on the secret. For several decades, a large and loyal TV viewership has watched Truman’s every move and empathized with his every crisis. Truman’s entire story—indeed, the whole world he inhabits—is the cre-

ation of the studio director Christoph (too heavyhanded?) who directs that world from a control room outside the giant biosphere that is Seahaven Island.

**“Pleasantville”:** In Pleasantville, life is also ideal. It never rains. The basketball team always wins (and never misses a shot!), parents and teens get along, everyone has friends, the fire department spends its time getting cats out of trees, and, oh yes, no one knows about sex.

Pleasantville, you have probably guessed, is a fictional setting for a black-and-white 1950s TV sitcom. In Pleasantville, there is no creator *per se*, but there is a strange TV repairman who controls the lives of the characters from outside the TV world. This repairman chooses to allow two teenagers from the 1990s—one of whom prefers the fictional Pleasantville to his own sadly fragmented life—to enter the show through the use of a TV remote control that has “a little more oomph.”

**I**n both films, dramatic tension is carried by the viewer’s awareness that in these fictional worlds, some characters have knowledge and some do not. Tension mounts as the characters who do not know they are being manipulated slowly begin to gain awareness as they exercise free will. In both films, the god-like character behind the scenes exercises a certain amount of power over the actors, but neither has

**I would argue that both films, in telling their stories, knowingly applied symbols and concepts from the Christian narrative.**

“sovereign” control. As the characters in the stories gain knowledge of their situations they gain power, and power—specifically the power to choose—holds dangers as well as promises.

The power of choice is a double-edged sword. In a “perfect world” life is safe, predictable, and happy. It is also, the films suggest, boring and less than truly human. “Pleasantville” illustrates this through the juxtaposition of black and white and color. In Pleasantville, life without choice is literally black and white. As characters discover that they can change their world, black and white gives way to color. One person gives another an apple (a bit obvious?) and *voila!* Color. A couple experience sex, and in that “knowledge” they take on color. Even the passion of an angry outburst causes a town leader to become “colored.”

In “The Truman Show,” Truman is left with only one real choice; Will he leave the perfect world Christof has designed, or will he choose freedom and leave? Which is better; the idyllic world of the creator, or a world of Truman’s own making outside the biosphere?

**B**y now you get the idea that both films use biblical imagery to explore and critique traditionally Christian ways of thinking. In both films choice and self expression are the supreme values. They imply optimism about human nature that suggests that, left to themselves, humans will make the

better choice more often than not. Free choice trumps submission to the will of any ultimate being. Indeed, it’s a good thing that the first couple ate the fruit.

The films also suggest that perfection, as commonly understood, is highly overrated. A meaningful life consists of more than the least painful black-and-white path through life to death. A major character in “Pleasantville” suggests, “There are so many things that are so much better, like silly, or sexy, or dangerous, or brief.”

A higher kind of perfection is to be found in a world in which all people freely seek unlimited self expression and self fulfillment—life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness. As it turns out, the solution the films find for their characters’ dilemmas are thoroughly American—and modern.

But again, is it legitimate to apply theological categories and Christian values to the discussion of popular films? A quick and incomplete answer would be: not to *all* films.

However, in a culture in which Christian memory continues to be part of the common experience; in a world in which the Bible and biblical imagery continues to turn up in art, even unintentionally; in that world, it would be wrong for Christian thinkers and artists *not* to join the conversation.

—*Dave Greiser, Hesston, Kansas, watches films and teaches theology and pastoral ministry at Hesston College.*



## What You Don't Notice Can Hurt You

*A Review of Food Politics and In Defense of Food*

Daniel Hertzler

*Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Our Nutrition and Health*, by Marion Nestle. University of California Press, 2002, 2007.

*In Defense of Food*, by Michael Pollan. The Penguin Press, 2008.

These two texts complement each other. The first is a research report and the second a sermon with three points. If you can read only one book on the subject, read the second. But the two together provide a more complete picture. They show that corporations have taken over food production in the U.S.—and that the results are not for our good.

We may remember that early in the twentieth century entrepreneurs and corporations took manufacturing away from craftsmen and drove prices down. Henry Ford introduced the assembly line and lowered the price of the Model T Ford so that even the workers could afford to buy one.

Since World War II corporations have moved into food production, and the result has been somewhat similar to Ford's assembly line. Americans have some of the cheapest food in the world as food companies compete with one another to get us to eat their food. But as Nestle shows, quality has suffered and overeating is widespread, particularly of fast food and snacks. Pollan asserts that the loaf of bread you buy in the supermarket will not support your system in the same way as the loaf your great-grandmother made from grain ground at the local mill.

Nestle provides extensive documentation of corporation pressure against the efforts of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to regulate processed foods. Some of the food companies' activities remind us of tobacco companies. Then we notice that some of the food companies are owned by tobacco companies. Nestle is identified as Professor and Chair of the Department of Nutrition and Food Studies at New York University. As a nutritionist, she has been involved in political activities regarding food and has had access to studies about the effects of food on our bodies. The book documents the baneful effects of some corporation food.

In the introduction she mentions several themes which will appear in the book. One is the "paradox of plenty" a term used by historian Harvey Levenstein to refer to the social consequences of food overabun-

dance, among them the sharp disparities in diet and health between rich and poor. . . . Most paradoxical in the presence of food overabundance is that large numbers of people in the United States do not have enough to eat" (27).

The second theme involves the scientific approach to finding what is wholesome and appropriate food. Some advocate other means of discernment. In addition, the interpretation of scientific studies may be controversial. "Government agencies invoke science as a basis for regulatory decisions. Food and supplement companies invoke science to oppose regulations and dietary advice that might adversely affect sales" (28).

A third theme is that "diet is a political issue. . . . Dietary practices raise political issues that cut right to the heart of democratic institutions" (28).

Nestle reports that the FDA has been repeatedly outmaneuvered by food companies. In Part One they are "Undermining Dietary Advice," particularly the food pyramid which was intended to help people know what proportion of various foods to eat for a wholesome diet. She writes, "Food industry pressure on Congress and federal agencies, ties between nutritionists and the food industry, an inability of just about everyone to separate science from personal beliefs and opinions (whether recognized or not) affect dietary advice" (91).

**Americans have some of the cheapest food in the world. . . . But . . . quality has suffered and overeating is widespread.**

Part Two, “Working the System,” describes how food companies use lobbying to get an advantage, and if that is not fully effective, they may use “hardball” tactics, lawsuits which are legal, and other schemes which may cross the line. Included here is an account of Oprah Winfrey’s conflict with the beef industry. She was sued for bad-mouthing hamburgers. Winfrey won the suit, but it was reported to have cost her more than \$1 million (164).

Part Three is “Exploiting Kids and Corrupting Schools.” This details some of the food companies’ efforts to advertise to children before they are old enough to tell the difference between entertainment and commercials. Chapter 9 describes the efforts of soft drink companies to promote their sugar water in schools. In some cases they have gotten cash hungry schools on their side by subsidizing school programs.

Part Four shows how makers and sellers of dietary supplements convinced the public and Congress that their products “did not need to be regulated according to the strict standards applied to conventional foods and drugs” (219). Part Five describes how “marketers are attempting to transform junk foods into health foods” (336).

Chapter 15 tells the strange story of olestra, a non-digestible fat substitute developed by Proctor and Gamble which was supposed to make potato chips more healthful since the substance in which they were fried was not digestible. But foods made

with olestra “may be fat-free but they are not calorie-free” (340). People eating snack foods fried in olestra may conclude that they are free to eat more and thus gain weight instead of losing weight.

Nestle observes that “no functional foods can ever replace the full range of nutrients and phytochemicals present in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, nor can they overcome the detrimental effects of diets that are not already healthful” (355). In her conclusion, Nestle suggests that we as eaters may vote with our forks.

The 2007 edition of Nestle’s book is basically the same as 2002, but the author has added a new Preface and an Afterword. The Preface mentions some furious reaction to her book even before it was published. The Afterword describes ongoing efforts to regulate foods and beverages. “By the end of 2006 the lines were drawn. Advocates as well as investment analysts, lawyers, and legislators had placed food companies on notice that they would have to change business practices in response to childhood obesity or face dire consequences” (393).

This can serve as an introduction to Pollan’s sermon, *In Defense of Food*. He lists the three points of his sermon at the beginning of the book. Then after extensive documentation of the problem, he explicates the three at the end. The three points are “Eat Food. Not Too Much. Mostly Plants” (1). The explications are more complex and interesting than I expected.

**Nestle suggests that we as eaters may vote with our forks.**

Pollan is a journalist, not a nutritionist, and he has some concern about the scientific approach to nutrition which Nestle tends to support. “Over the last several decades, mom lost much of her authority over the dinner menu, ceding it to scientists and food marketers (often an unhealthy alliance of the two) and, to a lesser extent, to the government with its ever shifting dietary guidelines, food-labeling rules, and perplexing pyramids” (3).

So now we have nutritionism with its “widely shared but unexamined assumption that the key to understanding food is indeed the nutrient. Put another way: Foods are essentially the sum of their nutrient parts” (28). This makes it possible to manipulate the parts under the assumption that less of one and more of another will make us healthier.

Whereas Nestle seems to favor scientific studies of food to see which foods are good for us, Pollan challenges this. “To make food choices more scientific is to empty them of their ethnic content and history; in theory, at least, nutritionism proposes a neutral, modernist, forward-looking, and potentially unifying answer to the question of what it might mean to eat like an American” (58). Pollan would not go there.

The problem, he says, is the “Western Diet.” The features of that are “lots of processed food and meat, lots of added sugar, lots of everything except fruits, vegetables, and whole grains” (89). He reports that when indigenous people adopt this diet, they accept the same diseases that afflict

modern Western people: diabetes, heart disease, and cancer.

He develops his answer by explicating his three points. In so doing he makes more generalizations than we readers will remember, but since they are printed instead of delivered orally, we can review them from time to time. Here are some samples. The first generalization under Point One is “Don’t eat anything your great-grandmother wouldn’t recognize as food” (148). A second one makes this clearer: “Avoid food products containing ingredients that are A) Unfamiliar, B) Unpronounceable, C) More than five in number, Or that include D) High-fructose corn syrup” (150). With this in mind I checked a bag of pretzels and some ice cream we had bought for a dinner party. Both violated the four-point rule. These are only the beginning of generalizations supporting the first point.

For some reason he discusses the third point before the second. Included here are “If you have the space, buy a freezer” (168) and “Eat well-grown food from healthy soils” (169). He points out that “organic” may cover a multitude of sins, so we should be discerning. “Most consumers automatically assume that the word ‘organic’ is synonymous with health, but it makes no difference to your insulin metabolism if the high fructose corn syrup in your soda is organic” (170). Also, he adds, “Regard nontraditional foods with skepticism” (176).

Under the second point (now the third) he asserts “Pay more, Eat less” (183). As Pollan notes, the emphasis in America has been to keep food

costs down. I have noticed this particularly in prices for eggs and chicken. I remember that as a young farmer in the '40s, I raised broilers over the summer and sold them for 35 cents a pound, live weight. I do not know what the products of the chicken factory are sold for today, but I wonder how much higher they are despite years of inflation. Pollan points out that if we pay more we're less likely to overeat. The unwary will be taken in by the siren song of the fast food people advertising hamburgers at a price that can't be beat. Another recommendation is to "Eat meals rather than snacks" (188) and "Do all your eating at a table" (192). Finally, "Cook, and, if you can, plant a garden" (197).

So there we have it. We're not doomed to follow the food marketers even though their commercials appear regularly on television. There is a way out of the food maze if we pay attention. Here and there we hear of people making a move in the right di-

**We're not doomed to follow the food marketers even though their commercials appear regularly on television. There is a way out of the food maze if we pay attention.**

rection. For example, there are community gardens in our area. And Michelle Obama has arranged for an organic garden on the White House lawn. One rumor has it that Dow Chemical is alarmed by its organic nature.

In addition, in *Atlantic Magazine* (July/August, 2009) there is the account of Tony Geraci, food-service director for the public schools of Baltimore who has changed the food available to students. "He stocked vending machines with box lunches that met the wellness policy's nutritional requirements" (32). Other food directors are making similar progress. "What unites these leaders is not grand ideology, but hardheaded realism about maneuvering through chronically underfunded systems."

If food-service directors can make progress against the fast food giants, we can too.

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



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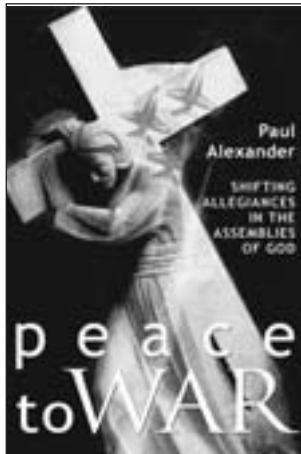
Here a father's history-telling combines with a daughter's personal journey of remembrance, loss, and grief. The voice of Nelson Good intertwines with that of his young adult daughter, Deborah, as he fights the cancer that will kill him while telling her the stories of seven projects, communities, and organizations he had cared about. "At its heart, a love story." —*John Stahl-Wert*

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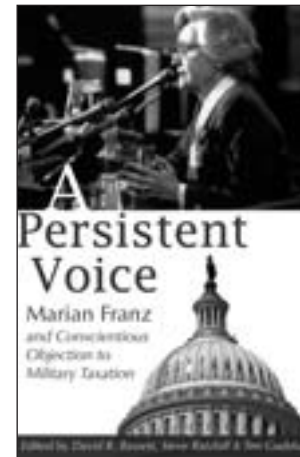
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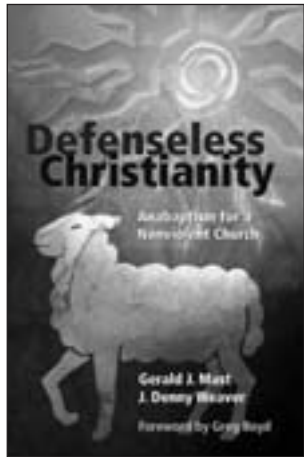
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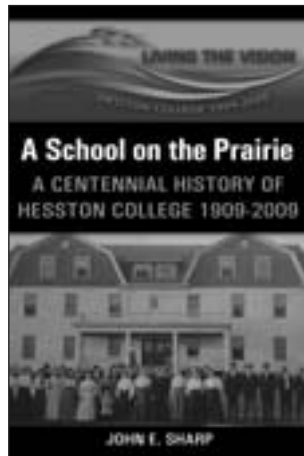
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*There Is Nothing Covered, That  
Shall Not Be Revealed*

—Matthew 10:26

Charlie Oberholtzer told me  
on the way home from school  
that there was no Santa Claus.  
I knew he was wrong  
or at least I was pretty sure.  
His family was Mennonite and did  
odd things like have a prayer  
before AND after they ate  
their meals which I thought excessive.  
Also they didn't have a radio  
in their house or at least  
I never heard one playing  
and I thought that explained a lot.  
Still Charlie was a year ahead of  
me in school and the wisdom  
of second graders loomed large  
in my assessment of trustworthiness.

Yes there is I said.  
No there isn't he said.  
My mother says there is I said  
triumphantly which effectively  
ended the conversation.

She stood at the sink  
and listened to my report  
then gave the dish towel a vicious  
flap. O that Charlie Oberholtzer  
I could wring his neck  
she said.

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