

DreamSeeker Magazine

Voices from the Soul



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and much more

Spring 2005

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Editorial: What if Monsters Are Real?

This issue begins with Noel King's story of Imogene's encounter with a monster because the question Imogene asks is an appropriate doorway into the rest of the issue: If monsters are real, what else thought untrue might actually be true?

Amy Spencer implicitly extends this unsettling question when she ponders whether it is in fact true that the only way to follow Jesus is to go to church. What if, she wonders, sometimes not going to church is the way to regain a true relationship with God?

Randy Klassen, deeply disappointed in a preemptively warmaking United States, wildly wonders what would happen if we loved our enemies instead of thinking the way to handle those we consider monstrous is to kill them. Mark Wenger does not address monsters when describing the Bible as a communal watering hole, yet the realities affirmed in the Bible he celebrates are even wilder than monsters that turn out to be real.

Audrey Metz opens a series of articles that deal in their various ways with our mortality. Here the monster that turns out to be real, hauntingly and shatteringly real, despite our regular efforts to deny it, is death. With unusual courage and directness, Metz confronts the deaths of loved ones.

Then Joe Postove tells the wrenching story of helping his mother leave this life to be born in the next. And Deborah Good shares the shattering of her family's normal life by her father's diagnosis of cancer.

Thereafter the articles gradually move from death back into life, but still asking what might be true or not—even if normally thought to be.

In my column I ask whether it's true that bigger and bigger and better and better is the point of life when in fact in the end we all get smaller and smaller. Renee Gehman asks if "easy buttons" are all they are cracked up to be. David

Greiser takes us into the exotic realm of Anime, in which cartoons are not just Saturday morning junk but windows into the mythic intensities of human existence. And Daniel Hertzler invites us to ask whether it is true that only the special few are called to be saints.

Finally, Joyce Peachey Lind and Joanne Lehman use poetry about fathers and mothers to invite our hearts into the ongoing cycle of life passed down through the generations, in all its wonder and grief. Here what is real is not monstrous, but the poets help us realize how extraordinary are the realities they invite us to enter.

—Michael A. King

The question Imogene asks is an appropriate doorway into the rest of the issue: If monsters are real, what else thought untrue might actually be true?



Editor

Michael A. King

Assistant Editor

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Publication, Printing, and Design

Cascadia Publishing House

Advertising

Michael A. King

Contact

126 Klingerman Road
Telford, PA 18969
1-215-723-9125
DSM@cascadiapublishinghouse.com

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Father's Day

We sat, disbelieving,
stranded in the middle of a snowstorm.
One week overdue,
I was sure the baby would be born
there in our living room.
You would pull me on a sled,
you calmly reassured,
we'd manage.

When the water broke, the next night,
we looked at each other,
as if one of us should know what to do next.
In the Karmann Ghia we breathed together,
steaming the windows
as you drove carefully through the snow.

That night,
rocking in the chair, I watched you sleep.
Gentle contractions made me wonder
if birthing would be this peaceful.

In the morning, between violent waves of pain,
I alternately asked for help, then pushed away
Not knowing, really, what I wanted.
You stood helplessly beside me,
wanting it to end as much as I did,
perhaps more.
There was nothing you could fix.

Then finally, new life emerged,
and we cradled him in our arms.
You were so proud that day, so quiet, so calm.
Your hands held him firmly, securely.

We took him home and began the tasks
of feeding, rocking, diapering,
and learning to know one another.

At night, his cries no longer sweet,
You took him out to feel the wind and see the stars.
Humming with the breeze,
you coaxed him into sleep.

It was there,
underneath the night sky
and the front yard tree,
that you became a father.

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

When Monsters Bite at Night

Noël R. King

Lmogene had just gone to bed one night when the impossible happened to her: a monster bit her on the ankle.

Just a few minutes before it happened, she had dangled one of her bare feet over the side of her bed as usual, out from under her comforter and designer sheets, free from all encumbrance and aggravating pressure on her skin. At 38 years of age, she still habitually thought of monsters under her bed whenever her feet were hanging out there in the dark, but she had always—until this singular, horrible moment—dismissed her vague fears as pure silliness and gone promptly to sleep.

On this particular night, however, a dark and chilly April Wednesday with a light rain falling, as she was lying there on her right side with her right foot suspended over the edge of the bed at about 10:30 p.m., having just turned out her bedside lamp about 10 minutes earlier, she was drifting off to sleep when she was jolted upright by the pain and shock of something chomping down on her ankle.

“Aieeeeeeeeeee!” she screamed, as she jerked her leg back onto the bed and rushed full force at the lamp she had so recently turned off. Fumbling and sweating

in her panic, her heart leaping into her throat and her hands shaking like crazy, she finally found the switch and stabbed it on, sweeping the lamp to her chest in one frenzied motion.

The light flooded the room and showed . . . nothing. Nothing out of the ordinary that she could see, anyway. But then she looked at her ankle and saw what she could only describe as a monster bite. She just knew that's what it was; you, too, would know if you had been bitten by a monster. You would be able to tell. You just would.

Oh, but what to do next? Obviously there was a monster on the loose in her house, and it was vicious. It had to still be under the bed, unless it had sprung away the instant it sank its teeth into her flesh.

Now this may sound foolish, and it very likely was, considering the circumstances, but Imogene could not take it, just sitting on that bed and wondering when the monster was going to come ripping up through her mattress or roaring over the end board. So she made a run for it; she had never moved so fast in her life. Unfortunately, her legs just weren't meant to move that fast, and she tripped about three feet from her bedroom door.

You would think, hearing this part, that it was all over for Imogene. That's what she thought, too. She fervently began praying to the Virgin Mary and all the saints above, good Catholic that she was, even as she struggled to get back to her feet. In the process, she accidentally caught a full glimpse under her bed—and promptly fainted with relief.

When she came to her senses a few minutes later, it was still true: There was no sign of any monster under her bed, nor, when she had thoroughly searched the rest of her house, anywhere else in her living quarters.

At this stage, she began to suspect that perhaps she merely had wakened herself from a nightmarish episode of sleepwalking, but a quick inspection of her ankle showed a purpling monster's bite just as clearly as ever. There could be no doubt: It was a monster's bite, plain as day.

The next day she scheduled an emergency session with her psychiatrist, just to see what kind of steps she might take, now that she had been bitten by a monster in such unsettling circumstances. The psychiatrist, while kind and sympathetic, was not very helpful. She told Imogene, "Listen, my dear. My area of expertise is depression, not monsters. Does it depress you that you were bitten by a monster?"

Imogene said, "No, Dr. White. It frightens me."

"Well, then," said her psychiatrist, "I'm afraid I can't help you. But let me know if your depression pills stop working."

Imogene then asked three of her closest friends to come over and help her scour her house once more, looking for any clues or signs whatsoever of a monster, such as maybe monster tracks. They found none, none at all.

The monster bite itself was not fatal, not even so terrible. It was simply a monster bite, and it healed naturally and normally, leaving no scars, for

which Imogene was both thankful and a bit disheartened, having survived such a tremendous fright with nothing to show for it except her dulling memory of it.

Oddly enough, she was not traumatized by the experience, and she did not even move from the house or buy a new bed or anything like that. She did ask her best friend to spend the night on a cot in her room with her for the first three nights after the incident, which her friend was kind (and intrepid) enough to do. Nothing disturbed their sleep; indeed, neither they nor anyone else ever saw any more signs of the original monster.

Imogene did sleep quite a bit for those first three days afterward, however. After all, her nervous system had received quite a shock. On the morning of the fourth day, as she sat up in bed, stretching her arms above her head and yawning in the presence of bright sunlight streaming in through her bedroom window, a terribly unsettling thought popped into her head, undeterred by the sunshine.

If there *were* monsters under the bed, even just once, when everybody said that such a thing was not possible, that monsters did not exist and es-

pecially that they did not hang around under people's beds at night, waiting to bite them, well then, *what else was not true in her life?* Or, to put it another way, what else was true that everyone else said was *not true?*

If there were monsters under the bed. . . what else was true that everyone else said was *not true?*

Imogene got out of bed then, and her life changed, just like that. She was astounded at all the things she had taken for granted just because people said it was so or not so. Like, you'll catch

a cold if you go outside with your hair wet. Or, eating candy is bad for you. And there were many, many other things, too, things far more important than colds and candy, but Imogene also realized something else pretty soon.

What if her monster had been just that—hers?

Shortly thereafter Imogene went back to school and became a clinical therapist. She doesn't know why, but she sure finds it interesting to hear about everybody else's monsters.

—*As circumstances warrant, through her Turquoise Pen column Noël R. King, Reston, Virginia, reports on strange and wonderful things, including monsters like Imogene's.*



Confessions of a Churchaholic

Amy Spencer

My name is Amy, and I'm a churchaholic. There. I said it.

It's Church Hour on Sunday morning, and instead of sitting in the pew, I'm at my computer, writing this confession in hopes that somewhere out there someone like me will read it and be encouraged. Maybe you're reading this in your easy chair at home or on a park bench. Or maybe it's Sunday morning—during the sermon?!—and you're *wishing* you were in your easy chair or at the park.

Don't get me wrong. I love the church. Community and fellowship are the bedrocks of my faith and discipleship, and Anabaptists are keen on this; hence, my faith has been deeply enriched by things Mennonite. The Anabaptists started out as a radical community, meeting wherever they could, in woods and caves—not unlike Jesus and his Twelve, who frequented hillsides and byways. They thrived in those hills and caves, those “churches,” where they found strength in each other and in God. I'm reminded of Paul's admonition, “Let us not give up meeting together” (Heb. 10:25). It's so important, do it in caves or on hillsides or in garbage dumps if you have to.

“So,” you might ask, “why aren't you in church?”

Like I said, I'm a churchaholic. I *need* not to be there. After years of wrestling, I've realized that my reasons for going to church don't have much to do with discipleship or relationships or even with God; they have more to do with addictions and bad habits. Again, don't get me wrong. Lots of wonderful things happen at church. It's a great place—for most people.

Let me give you some background. I went to church every Sunday for the first 18 years of my life—and I was utterly bored. Never would I have set foot in a church after high school but for two reasons: first, “church on Sunday” was ingrained, something I was supposed to do; second—and most important—at 17 I had a deep experience with God in which I committed myself to follow Jesus. And how else does one follow Jesus but by going to church every Sunday . . . right?

After traveling through the Christian scene for twenty-some years, starting in a mainline denomination and making stops in campus fundamentalism and charismatic gatherings and missionary gangs, I finally parked in the Mennonite church. And here I stay. Sort of.

You might label me the ultimate postmodern: always seeking something *more*. Well, I happen to be seeking Jesus, and there is always *more* of him to be found. And I've found him

in every one of those places: the Church of Tedium, the College Club for Control Freaks, the Congregation of the Waving Hands, the Choir Without Accompaniment.

I am an alien, a stranger to every form of Sunday-go-to-meetin' I've been committed to. Call me church-impaired. It's a weakness; I just don't “get” church.

But something in me always shuts down during an ordinary—and even a not-so-ordinary—churchish Sunday morning. I can worship at moments, or at least pretend to. I can chat away in Sunday school, even somewhat astutely. But I am an alien, a stranger to every form of Sunday-go-to-meetin' I've been com-

mitted to. Call me church-impaired. It's a weakness; I just don't “get” church.

It's important that you know another thing, because maybe you can relate: I am always hoping for new people to be drawn into Jesus. Looking out for the outsider—that's a passion of mine, an obsession. How could it not be? Jesus is so . . . essential; he is the Key for every single person and for the whole world.

This evangelical spirit makes church hard for me, oddly enough. There I sit, in the same pew every Sunday, listening to the undeniably good sermon; joining in the four-part hymn resonating heavenward; praying for sick friends-who-have-become-sorta-family; grinning as my son does special music. . . .

For heaven's sake! Why am I not there today?

Because I can't take it anymore, the way the church (and I, when I'm being a good "church person") hoards the gospel. It's like packing away bags and bags of food in our church cabinets while a hungry child stares in at us through a rain-spotted window. After a while, all that yummy apple butter and fresh-baked bread tastes rotten.

As I sit in my pew, I think about the church building (it may be simple, but it's opulently unfriendly) and wonder why I'm tithing for it. I think of those who have been so damaged by churchly abuses that they have rejected God. And those who have never darkened a church door because they think God is totally irrelevant. And those like me who are in the church, but not of it.

Lord knows I've tried hard not to be critical and to fit in. "Just live with it" has been my motto. (And have I ever! Thought control is an incredible thing.) "Learn to love it like they do" was a good one too, and it even worked at times. But I finally had to realize who I am; I had to come to grips with my very self. "Just live with it" was clearly no longer a healthy enough response.

I realized I didn't have to live with it anymore. Belonging to a big herd has its good and godly points, no doubt, but too often I have taken shelter in the herd to the point of compromising God's call. I hear someone else's reasons for not following on the hard way, and I take that as a good excuse for me not to also. God may be

pushing me to take a risk that is uniquely tailored for me, but I don't, because . . . well . . . no one else is doing it. (Duh!)

Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt, a Christian thinker of the nineteenth century who influenced many theologians of the twentieth, echoes my cry: "We must come to the point where we can experience God . . . and have fellowship with him. I am not talking about any sort of theology [or form of church], but something much more real than words! There must be deeds. Deeds are true."

I came to a point (and I return to it often) where I had to recognize that I was taking comfort, and even pride, in my theologies and my deed-doing. But so often my deeds were mere habits—even addictions to meet some need—rather than Spirit-led, Spirit-infused acts. So often I acted out my false "church" self instead of living freely as my God-made self.

I have had to come to grips with this addiction and realize there is *no* life in deeds for the sake of deeds, for the sake of tradition, for the sake of theological rightness, for the sake of churchliness. There *is* life in deeds (including going to church) only when those acts are for the sake of our Lord of love. "Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31).

So, to break a habit of lifeless doing, to break my need to follow in the same way other people follow, I decided to

I decided to leave church as I knew it and join that hungry, cold child outside.

leave church as I knew it and join that hungry, cold child outside. More than a year ago, my husband and I put on our coats and galoshes to go sloshing around in search of a new hillside or cave, a form of fellowship that enriches more than it frustrates, a way that includes people like us, a way to a spiritual feast that nourishes but doesn't make us fat and sedated.

There are other Jesus followers out here searching. We haven't given up meeting together, but we are meeting outside the traditional church. Maybe we'll find ourselves on the way to Emmaus or on Damascus Road, learning from Jesus something that will meet the needs of a new (though

very old) world. Maybe we'll wander outside until we die, never finding a way. Or maybe we'll come back to church next Sunday.

All I know is, for the sake of my relationship with myself and my God—and, just maybe, for the sake of coming generations of believers—I'm off walking, in search of a hillside.

—*Amy Spencer, Kalona, Iowa, is a freelance book editor who enjoys her husband and two teens almost to the point of idolatry. A sometimes-seminarian, she also likes preaching, poetry, presenting devotions at the local retirement home, and exploring all things Celtic.*



I've Come Full Circle

Randy Klassen

My Christian journey seems to have come full circle, but I did not recognize the value of what I had left until I had returned.

Beginning in the mid-1930s in Winnipeg, my parents, faithful to their tradition, took me to a Mennonite Brethren church. In those days everything expressed in the church was in German.

That was only one of the reasons I did not like the church. The preachers often seemed to yell. I'm sure they said much that was good, but I could not understand it. The taboos, however, were quickly translated into English. The word *English* itself was used as a synonym for worldly. So the church appeared to this teenager as a bastion of rules and regulations—anti-culture and anti-fun.

Then, during World War II, my dad chose brief participation in the Naval Reserve. He never touched a gun, but the uniform was disgrace enough, so he was asked to leave the church. Actually we were all glad to leave those narrow-minded Mennonites and find an English speaking church.

At age 18 I experienced a unique encounter with Jesus Christ that changed my life. I felt so grateful for

pardon and adoption into God's family that I soon felt a strong desire to preach this good news to others—in English, of course.

Surprisingly, my search for a denomination brought me to the Evangelical Covenant Church. Its members had struggled with their original language situation and had left their Swedish behind a couple of decades before. Their Lutheran background included Pietistic and Moravian influences, which in some ways were not too dissimilar from Anabaptism. I appreciated their focus on Christ as Lord and so served in this denominational family for 40 years.

Yet it seems when the command to love our enemies is heard, we dodge the call. It's idealistic but unrealistic, some claim. Some even think the way to peace is to eliminate the enemy!

The longer I pastored, the more I pondered the meaning and mission of the church. It's too easy for a pastor to get trapped into a role of maintaining a tradition or struggling for church growth by any means possible. But when one reads and rereads the Gospels, it soon becomes evident that love for God and love for neighbor are given top priority.

I am convinced that Jesus intended the church to become the embodiment of everything he taught and did. Paul affirmed this when he wrote, "the church . . . is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all" (Eph. 1:23). Surely this means we in the church are to incarnate Christ's love for "neighbor." And "neighbor" includes "enemy" (Matt. 5:44). Such love is to

be central and foremost in the life of a Christian church.

Yet it seems when the command to love our enemies is heard, we dodge the call. It's idealistic but unrealistic, some claim. Some even think the way to peace is to eliminate the enemy! More often interpreters say that Jesus meant only our personal enemies, like the difficult person at the office or the careless person next door. However, we need to remember that Jesus was living in an occupied land in a situation of political violence. For the first disciples his message was unmistakable. Jesus meant that his followers not return violence for violence, evil for evil.

During their first 300 years, Christians remained courageously pacifist, even when the result was death. They took seriously Jesus' call to love the enemy by overcoming evil with good.

The insightful theologian Walter Wink notes that historians cannot find a single Christian writer in the first three centuries "who approved Christian participation in battle" (*The Powers That Be*, Doubleday, 1998, p. 129). The early church saw itself as inaugurating a new order in which all people are included in God's love. "All" included slaves, the poor and marginalized, and all enemies. So what happened next?

When Emperor Constantine endorsed Christianity in 313 C.E., this brought to a close the many waves of

persecution Christians had endured since the first century C.E. The church's response was joy, confusion, and compromise. Suddenly it was legal to be a Christian. That brought joy.

The emperor called himself a Christian and therefore so did most others, as it was the most politically expedient thing to do. That produced confusion.

Then church and state married, forming an alliance called the "Holy Roman Empire." That was compromise. The empire proved to be anything but "holy." By 380 C.E., non-Christians were being persecuted! Jesus' design for his church to be a community of love and nonviolence had been betrayed. Instead of challenging the warring ways of the empire, the church justified them. It still does in most of the Western world, including the United States, which we like to say is "under God."

Fame and fortune had not brought meaning into the life of Count Leo Tolstoy. So he explored religions and, in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, found what he believed was the answer to the question of why and how people should live. He wrote, "Only by fulfilling the law of love in its true, rather limited meaning, i.e., as the supreme law does not admit any exceptions, can one find salvation from the terrible, increasingly disastrous and apparently hopeless situation of the 'Christian' nations today. For a Christian who has recognized the demands of the law of love, none of the demands of the laws of violence can

be obligatory, but present themselves as human errors which must be exposed and abolished."

This, Tolstoy concluded, was God's way and therefore the only way to peace and harmony in the world. Tolstoy is remembered as a great novelist, not as a theologian, yet his description of Christ's way of love is right on the mark. To my ears, it sounds Mennonite!

So he returned to the church, only to be shocked to see the Orthodox Church supporting the czar in oppressing the poor and fighting its enemies. Since the Orthodox claimed to be the one true expression of Christ's church, its enemies therefore included Roman Catholics and Protestants. Then he learned that these same religious bodies made similar claims and justified their killings of all enemies, including Jews and Muslims.

That did not look like the "body of Christ," so Tolstoy left the church. Or did the church leave her Lord? (Technically, Tolstoy was ex-communicated by the Russian Orthodox Church for his denunciations of its anti-love practices.)

Has the church improved over the years? Thankfully, there are dedicated communities involved in proactive peacemaking, such as the Carter Center, the Salvation Army, World Vision. Numerous church-related organizations, like Mennonite Central Committee and scores of similar organizations give evidence of faithful followings of Christ's love.

But far more needs to be done. Although Christianity is numerically the world's largest religion, the global

situation is not encouraging. The twentieth century saw more violent deaths—109 million—than all preceding 10,000 years combined, as recorded by Walter Wink (p. 137).

Wink further notes that in just the 1990s, some two million children died as victims of warfare. That is more than three times the number of battlefield deaths of American soldiers in all wars since 1776!

If love is the law of life, then peacemaking lies at the heart of the gospel. We have been given "the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:18). To waste our energies on doctrinal disputes or liturgical differences, or to cozy up to political leaders to gain some kind of favoritism or material advantage, is a betrayal of our Lord.

We who belong to the church do not exist for ourselves. We are to be as passionately concerned for justice as were the biblical prophets. The words for justice in Hebrew and Greek appear 1060 times in the Bible. We are to be radically committed to an identity with the needy and marginalized and proactively involved in peacemaking. Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called the children of God" (Matt. 5:9).

We need to unsentimentalize the word *love*. We need to see it as the most needed, most demanding, most challenging, and most redemptive power in the world. Then we need to

pray for God's Spirit to give us the courage and wisdom to express this love in action. Was that not what Menno Simons was calling God's children to do? Is that not what the Quakers, the Brethren, the Anabaptists, and other peace churches are attempting to say to our world? If so, I want to join their chorus.

The killing of thousands of innocent children and their parents as well as the deaths of our service men and women caused by a preemptive strike sicken me.

I am disappointed in the warring ways of the United States. The killing of thousands of innocent children and their parents as well as the deaths of our

service men and women caused by a preemptive strike sicken me. Clearly, Christ's way is to overcome evil with good. Tragically, our country fails to make the supreme effort of following that way of love. Should the church not judge this country's worldly ways?

I once thought a conscientious objector was a coward. Now I see her or him as a role model. If there were a Mennonite church here in Walla Walla, my wife and I would join it. Indeed, it appears I have come full circle.

—Randy Klassen, Walla Walla, Washington, served as pastor in Covenant Church congregations for 34 years and developed two new churches. For four years he was Covenant Church Executive Secretary of Evangelism, and he did artwork professionally for six years. He has written many books and articles, most recently *What Does the Bible Really Say About Hell?* (Pandora Press U.S., 2001).

In Praise of the Bible

Mark R. Wenger

The local African-American community rents our worship space from time to time for weddings and funerals. This was a funeral for a beloved saint. The place was packed. I stood at the controls of the sound system. The pastor stepped into the sanctuary at the head of the procession. His clear voice rang into the silence. The words and cadence triggered a visceral response within me. It was pre-reflective, a shiver up and down the spine.

Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God. Thou turnest man to destruction; and sayest, Return, ye children of men. For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night.

The pastor led the large extended family down the center aisle. He took his place at the pulpit. The family slowly walked by the open casket in front to take their seats from the side aisle. All the while the pastor in-

toned the ancient words of Scripture from the King James Version, words about God, about death, about eternal life. Then the “home-going” service began and lasted two hours.

I’ve been exposed to the Bible since before I can remember. Bible story books, “sword drills,” memorizing verses, listening to innumerable sermons. For the first 15 years of my life, that was almost exclusively in King James English. Then the American Bible Society came out with *Good News for Modern Man*. I remember hawking paperback copies for 25 cents each after revival services in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

In the years since, I’ve studied Greek and Hebrew, learned the rudimentary skills of historical and literary critical study, written exegesis papers, preached many sermons, and become familiar with a dozen or more English translations. Just last year, as part of a family challenge, I read from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22 from *The Message*.

I stand within the broad Christian community that accepts the 39 books of the Old Testament and the 27 books of the New Testament as canonical, possessing a sacred and authoritative character. I’m not enough of a historian to be able to trace the profound influence of the Bible in shaping a sense of community of shared stories and values in the last 2,000 years. But I’ve seen it happen

countless times on a smaller scale. The funeral service convened under the sacred canopy of Scripture is simply one unforgettable example.

Of course, I’m aware that the Bible has also sparked many arguments and disagreements. I’ve taken part in my share and will no doubt in the future. There are lasting rips in the fabric of Christian community that can be partly traced to conflicting views of Scripture. Tensions exist today. This morning’s newspaper contains a story on the terrific stresses straining the worldwide Anglican Communion.

But I am most intrigued by the way the Bible serves as a watering hole, a community gathering place, and a source of wisdom and sustenance. Yes, I know, what we bring to the Bible plays a big part in what we find there. But the opposite is also true. What is found between its covers molds, illuminates, and draws people into closer proximity to each other, helping to shape them into a community through story and divine truth. A watering hole can bring enemies together.

As a pastor, I often make use of the Bible in public worship. Today there are so many different English translations available that it’s almost impossible to read a passage of Scripture aloud together. I don’t want to go back to the days of King James hegemony. I like the new variety and so do many others. But for common worship and study, there is no denying a loss: the

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erosion of shared language and rhythms. I worry about how that weakens identity and cohesion. A congregation will do well to select a preferred version, recommending it to each other and using it for public services.

The Bible is precious to me, however, for more than what it does to shape community. It's precious because of what it is: a chorus of voices from a people of faith giving witness to a God who created, loved, guided, rescued, and empowered them. "Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (1 Peter 2:10). The Bible is God's Word written, even as it is a very human record of God's decisive activities.

In January 2005, I was invited to speak to the Tuesday evening Bible study at the Virginia Mennonite Retirement Community in Harrisonburg. The instructions were general: "Share from your journey with the Scriptures." In pondering what to say, my inspiration came from David Letterman, of all people. Letterman is fond of "top 10" lists. Why not share my list of top 10 Scripture verses?

This was easier said than done! My initial list contained 50 passages of one or two verses. The first cut took me to 25 selections. Then it got tough. Five cuts later I had my top 10,

The Bible is precious to me. . . . because of what it is: a chorus of voices from a people of faith giving witness to a God who created, loved, guided, rescued, and empowered them.

but not before tossing treasure overboard in a desperate attempt to reach my goal. Here they are:

10. 2 Timothy 3:16: "All Scripture is inspired by God. . . ."

9. Exodus 3:13-14: "God said, 'I AM WHO I AM.' . . ."

8. Psalm 19:1-2: "The heavens declare the Glory of God. . . ."

7. Genesis 1:26-27: "So God created humankind in his image . . . male and female. . . ."

6. Micah 6:8: ". . . do justice . . . love mercy . . . walk humbly with your God."

5. John 1:14: "The Word became flesh and live among us . . . full of grace and truth."

4. Acts 2:38-39: "Repent . . . be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ . . ."

3. 1 Corinthians 1:18 "The message of the cross is foolishness . . . power of God."

2. 1 Peter 2:9-10: "Once you were not a people but now you are God's people. . . ."

1. Revelation 5:11-12: "Worthy is the Lamb. . . ."

In her book, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, Kathleen Norris writes of the "scariest story" she knows about the Bible. An acquaintance, Arlo, received a big fancy Bible as a wedding present from his grandfather. It ended up in the box in the bedroom closet. But every time Grandpa saw Arlo, he asked how Arlo liked the Bible. Arlo's wife had written a thank-you note, they'd thanked him

in person, but he just wouldn't let it lie.

Finally Arlo got curious. He took the Bible out of the closet and had a look. "I found that Granddad had placed a 25-dollar bill at the beginning of the book of Genesis, and at the beginning of every book of the d--- thing, over 1300 dollars in all. And he knew I'd never find it!"

The Bible may no longer be the gathering place it once was in the public square. But that's okay. For many people of faith, the Bible still retains a

mysterious power to shape a shared history, a common consciousness, and hope for the future. It contains timeless treasures for personal and communal blessing for those who take the trouble to open its pages and imbibe the richness.

—*Mart R. Wenger, now a pastor in Waynesboro, Virginia, will in June 2005 become Coordinator of Pastoral Training Programs for Eastern Mennonite University in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.*



Death

The Sting, the Victory

Audrey A. Metz

These three things I know intimately about death:

- (1) It often strikes like lightning and leaves a stinging, consuming pain.
- (2) It seldom comes at the “right” time.
- (3) It causes beautiful memories to be etched in grief, pain, and—often—guilt.

Before Elizabeth Kubler-Ross wrote her book *On Death and Dying*, describing in detail the five stages of death, it was sometimes considered morbid and inappropriate to talk about death. In Christian circles, it was sometimes suggested that those who continued to grieve were not accepting the will of God. Through Kubler-Ross’s book, we learned that it’s okay to be in denial, to be angry, to bargain with God, to be depressed, and finally to accept the unacceptable.

Lately, it seems to me that I have become too closely acquainted with death. Too many who were close to me have died. None gave me adequate time to bargain with God, to say all I wanted to say in my good-byes, to prepare me for the inevitable moment of separation.

I admit to some anger as I write that. Life was taken away from them. To accept their deaths while enjoying my life seems selfish. Shallow. Unacceptable.

My earliest experience with death was as a child, when my Uncle Titus died. I remember him as the uncle of the smiling eyes, kindness coming from deep inside those eyes. At the funeral, I sat on the front bench in the gray stone Towamencin Mennonite church. When a sob escaped from me during the service, it shocked me. I didn’t know it was going to come out for everybody to hear. And it annoyed the person sitting beside me—an elbow poked me into choking back the rest of my childish grief.

When my second child was about three years old, I miscarried at 12 weeks. I shed no tears over that loss. My doctor had told me that I should consider it Mother Nature’s way of getting rid of a faulty fetus. To give him credit, he did apologize for stating the situation in those hard, blunt terms. But the fact is I never gave myself permission to grieve, nor did anyone else. In fact, nobody seemed to consider this as a real death.

So I shoved the experience out of my life, convincing myself that this was not really a child. Months later, my mother-in-law mentioned “Your little angel in heaven.” Her tears flowed easily. I wondered at her ability to cry about it when I had not shed one tear. From my mother-in-law I learned the importance of knowing loss, exposing it to the light of recognition, naming grief as necessary work.

In my middle adult years, I was asked to walk with a member of my Sunday school class through her jour-

ney with cancer. Wanda asked me if I would be willing to talk with her, listen to her story one-on-one, then write out her thoughts and present the paper to the class. I accepted her request as a compliment, never dreaming how our times together would come to affect me.

My time with Wanda in the last months of her life involved deep soul-searching on my part. Many times when I left her I was overwhelmed by disbelief that this was happening to this trusting person. Frequently I was jolted with anger. At one point, I exploded, “Wanda, how can you accept this so easily?”

Her patient response was “I love Jesus and am looking forward to meeting him. If I die—and I probably will soon—I accept it as God’s will.”

Why is it that I had a much harder time with that than she did? I would go on living. She was dying, and she was saying “It’s all right. I accept this.”

Many years later, it’s still impossible for me to think of death as a welcoming of God’s will. Rather, it gives me some comfort to know that Jesus wept at the graveside of his friend, Lazarus—that Jesus too had trouble accepting death. That knowledge gives me permission to question and grieve.

My friend Ellen died of Lou Gehrig’s disease. I was in a journaling group with her at the time. I remember the night she told us. “I want to live. I love life, but I have this disease

It’s still impossible for me to think of death as a welcoming of God’s will.

for which there is no cure. So now I am on a new journey. *And for as long as I have, I want to learn all it has to teach me.*” I cannot imagine looking death in the eye with such boldness, such daring.

The year I moved to D.C., my much-loved brother Floyd died. Six years older than I, he had always been my self-appointed knight, my hero. Although we had known he was ill, his death stunned me. I went to the National Cathedral to wander about anonymously, lighting a candle in one of the chapels, then standing in a circle with others in the nave to be given the sacraments as part of the regular noon schedule. As I accepted the sacraments, tears streamed down my face, and I remember the kindness on the priest’s face as he offered me the wafer and wine.

Two years later, in April 2001, it seemed perhaps my time had come to look into the face of my own death. I was 62 and had just been diagnosed with colon cancer. Surgery was scheduled less than two weeks later. During the days before surgery, I was to ask myself: If worst comes to worst, will I look Death in the eye, daring him to conquer my body, my will to live, or will I go “gentle into that dark night”? I was spared the answer. The pathologist’s report came back three days post-surgery: *We Got It All*. My own death summons had been delayed.

Before my surgery, I had called my friend Margaret to tell her my fright-

ening news. She had hung up the phone in a rush of uncontrollable sobs. She was afraid I was dying. Three years and five months later, on September 21, 2004, Margaret was told she had acute leukemia and a week to live, tops. There was literally

If worst comes to worst, will I look Death in the eye, daring him to conquer my body, my will to live, or will I go “gentle into that dark night”?

no time for those of us who lived at a distance, to say good-bye. There was only trying to maintain equilibrium, offering prayers and phone calls to the family, and making plans to travel, should death not be stayed by a miracle.

There was to be no miracle. She lived only six more days. I awoke at 4:30 that morning and got up to make coffee and have some quiet time before the city noises revved up to. At 5:30 the phone rang. Margaret’s son told me, “My mother made her transition from this life at about 4:30 this morning.”

The thought came to me that perhaps my consciousness was with Margaret those first few moments as her spirit left behind the betrayal of her body. I like to believe that perhaps I was there, for just a fleeting moment, just before I awoke, to help her do that. Perhaps that was what awakened me. Perhaps, after all, I had said good-bye to her.

I wonder: if we did indeed have a few moments together as she was leaving this earth, what might our spirits have said to one another? How do you say goodbye to someone who has been your loyal friend, your patient confidant for 41 years?

Two months and two weeks after Margaret’s death, another friend died—same diagnosis, same prognosis. Four days after a diagnosis of acute leukemia, Luke was gone. In the days that followed, it was sometimes difficult to know if it was life or death that was surreal. Death had again slammed the door on a well-lived life, on many good memories. Those memories were now full of pain, taunted by “If only” and “What if” scenarios that will never have answers.

I know we must all die, eventually. Perhaps when it’s my turn, I will have lived long enough or well enough, finally, to accept death as boldly as my friends did. I can hope not only that their lives have enriched my living but also that their deaths have taught me something about how to die.

Among my first thoughts, on hearing of Margaret’s death, was this one; *What an empty place she will leave in my life.* At the same time, I knew that there can be no empty spaces

where loved ones have shared my life. They are still here, each in her or his own place in my memories, alive with all the things we did together. They are a warm, living piece of my own personal history.

Although I can no longer share laughter and conversation with them, long rides on quiet country roads, coffee served in delicate teacups or serious mugs, walking through the first snowfall of the year together, they will always be there in the only place they’ll never die—in my heart and those of all whose lives they graced. Nothing can take that away.

Death will never have that victory.

—Audrey Alderfer Metz has lived in many states and is now enjoying the pigeons and people in Washington, D.C., where she manages the bookservice in The Potter’s House in Adams Morgan. When not otherwise occupied, she enjoys traveling—whether flying or driving her beautifully weathereed 1990 Honda Civic.



A Second Birth

Joe Postove

Although my mother had two daughters and two sons, I was her only child. I never married. And never quite grew up. When I got the call from my brother Jack that her cancer had recurred and she would die soon, I borrowed the money for the trip from my friend so I could be with her at the end—not knowing that I would be responsible for taking her past that point and into death itself. I spent three and a half weeks out in California, but it was in the last two hours of my mother's living that I discovered meaning in the face of dying.

I landed in L.A. that pretty Thursday afternoon thinking about the 25 years since I'd lived there. Moving there with Mom in 1977, I'd expected the rarified air of glamour and wealth that permeated Hollywood to carry me off immediately and joyously. Two years later, a hundred pounds heavier, and with failure tattooed upon my very being, I returned home to Virginia. My mother was glad to see me go, I was sorry to be alive, and our relationship was broken.

Home in Norfolk, my father took me back from the foolishness of California. He was right, of course. If I was going to be a bum, it was at least simpler to be one back home. Once in my own haunt, I began to level myself, never reaching grownuphood but attain-

ing a sort of midlevel maturity. I could become 40 without those things one normally associates with 40: wife, family, career. I would not trouble anyone with my trouble. But alone in the world, I was free. And even God will tell you that through freedom flow all possible roads.

I was not okay, though. My relationship with my mother had been corrupted. Although we saw each other through the years and spoke often, it was not until she fell and nearly died three years ago that we became less mother and son and more very good friends.

After her fall, my brother Jack put Mom into a nursing home, despite my ardent protestations. "This will kill her," I said. "This will signal to her that we have agreed to oversee the end of her life. You can't take away her self!" I went to L.A. to inspect the facilities for myself; to my amazement, they were clean, the staff was friendly, and Mom was happy. I returned to Norfolk satisfied that this would do. That Jack was right. And that Mom was happy.

But how happy can a woman be when she's not in charge of her life? My mother, who had sold clothes at the tony Bonwit Teller in Beverly Hills for years, was now part of the ongoing soap opera of a convalescent home.

What could I do? I was in Virginia. I was helpless. Besides, what did Mom care? We had a nice relationship. Why fool with it by trying to get too close? I was going back to Vir-

ginia. Let Jack ignore her. I'd call every few weeks, like always.

I began to call every night, at first out of guilt, not willing to see her in my mind's eye gazing at the phone, hoping that even a telemarketer might call. Then out of habit, as we began to engage in long conversations about family: How was it, for instance, that her father was a communist and my sister an Orthodox Jew?

And then with a smooth transition that flowered almost incidentally, out of a deep respect and friendship that was not so much reborn as newfound, I discovered an audience for my rotten jokes, an ear for my troubles, and a voice I was beginning to recall as the one that had soothed me as a child.

One day, about halfway through our regular evening phone session, Mom asked me to forgive her. She wanted me to forgive her for not saving me in California. She asked repeatedly, but I refused every time. I said my breakdown was not her fault. She said she should have tried harder to understand. I said I was a horrible person to live with, and she was right to move away. She said I was her son, and she should have stood by me when I needed her most.

She had me there. I had been harboring that exact sentiment for over 20 years. She was right. I wanted to forgive her. And I believed it was a fair exchange: my forgiveness for her peace of mind.

**One day . . .
Mom asked me
to forgive her.
She wanted me
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not saving me in
California.**

At 4:00 a.m. Pacific time on a Sunday morning, 10 days after I had flown into California, I woke next to my mother's bed in the nursing home. The most absolutely terrifying thing I could ever imagine was about to come true. My mother would die.

The days after Mom received her sentence and then entry into hospice care I had spent wandering the long halls of her nursing home. I saw people who needed to die and would not. And I saw even more who wanted to die but could not. What they saw when they looked at me, I cannot say. I began to feel the necessity of a place "afterward." And that could not be just a hole for bones. Mom's eternal life would be a return to her happiest place. And to be with those who had made it so. I had not come to Los Angeles to watch my mother simply wither and die. It was my responsibility to help her to that "happiest place."

When I awoke that Sunday morning, she was breathing heavily. Just the night before, her face had been distorted by the cancer. Now her face seemed relaxed, even youthful. Her gulped breaths of air were trading evenly with what seemed a mindful repose. She was shutting down her old machinery as best she could. But she needed help.

Sometime after arriving in California, I had begun envisioning a marvelous gathering of dead loved ones: people, some of whom I'd never met, massing at the depot of an old train station, to receive my mother. All in color, as if on film, an excited

group of disparate men and women were ready to take her from my hands into theirs. I could see Great-Grandmother (Ta'Necha), Gram, Toby, Danny, Bernie, Sam, my dad, her dad, Beepa, Estelle, Herma, and dozens more excitedly awaiting her arrival. I knew her time was near.

I took her hand and caressed it. I did not want to tear the old wrinkled skin. Her hands were clenched, but I eased my palm into hers and began to speak softly. I searched for words to assure Mom that her death would be a beautiful, simple thing.

"You will never leave me, but there is a great party waiting for you, Dotty. Look, there are all the ones you told me about. I want you to step lightly now, as we go. We'll go slowly, but you will soon be there. And then I will turn you over to that grand gathering, waiting with great anticipation for the one they love so much."

Her breathing was light now, gathering in as much of the fresh air as her weak body would allow, and letting it out with a slight whisper of the lips. "I know where you're going, Mom. Look at them all, so happy, so excited, and so giddy. And it's all because they get to have you now. God would be upset if I said I wanted to go with you, so I won't say that.

"See, Mom, I want you to go ahead. It's okay. It's all right. They've been waiting so long now. It's been seventy years since your dad died. He was only 37, and he adored his little Dotty. Remember how you told him you weren't ready for school yet, so he let you stay home until you were seven?

"You didn't stay home much, though. He let you come to the store. What could a six-year-old girl do in a men's shop? She could let her dad love her full time for a whole year before going off to the trenches of the first grade. Gram was furious, but she relented.

"And now he wants you back. I understand. I really do. That's why I can say these words, Mom. I can't stand to let you leave me, but I want you to go to him."

It was about 5:10 a.m., I was talking with what I remember as a furious quietude. I saw the eyes of the only person from whom I had ever expected, or received, unconditional love. Unconditional love is a concept difficult to understand or even believe in at times, but Mom loved me because I was good, and I was good because she loved me. To be loved by your mother is right next to being loved by God, I think. This is the cycle of loving-kindness that good people continue from generation to generation.

"I want you to hold me, Mom, as I am holding you. But you are slipping from my grasp. I'm letting go. You can too. I give you permission. I give you permission."

Were my words merely trendy, fashionable, "New Age"? I couldn't believe that it had come to this: my not doing everything in my concrete and spiritual power to hold on to her.

Two tears appeared. I could not be certain that Mom was hearing what I was saying. Perhaps I was performing

this monologue for God's benefit. Maybe I was doing it only for me, and Mom, despite the breathing, was essentially dead. After all, she had not taken a bite of food for days and was deeply sedated. I continued on, even so, because I believed Mom could

hear me. I believed we were giving birth to her death and thus her second life.

I believed Mom could hear me. I believed we were giving birth to her death and thus her second life.

I was bearing down now. Mom's breathing was becoming more labored. I was holding her hand tighter.

God was noticeably out of the room. I wasn't thinking of God much now. The vividness of the other side,

all of Mom's people waiting and peering, looking sideways, with the expectation of a train rounding a bend, had converted me from an agnostic to a believer. Not in God—I believed in God, well enough—but in the future of life in one's death.

I didn't worry about God's absence. While holding on to her withered hands, I didn't think of God at all. He had stepped back for this time. A respectful Lord had allowed me to be alone with my mother in this sacred moment.

It was 6:10 a.m. I called my sister and told her to hurry. Using my mother's first name as I had many times before, jokingly, but now with the intensity that I needed to reach her: "Dotty, Dotty, it's time, my darling. You're free. All the family are assembled and ready to receive you." Her hand clenched less tightly around mine. Her breathing was now a gentle

but deliberate gasping. “Go, Mom. I’ll be okay. But I want you to go now. I can’t keep you to myself anymore.”

Then I sang her a song we had grown to love in our nightly phone conversations, which she found funny (I took both the male and female parts), but of which I knew she understood the poignancy.

Daddy sang bass (Mama sang tenor),
me and little brother would join
right in there,
Singin’ seems to help a troubled soul.
One of these days, and it won’t be
long,
I’ll rejoin them in a song

I’m gonna join the family circle at
the throne.

I kissed her once more. Now with three slow inhalations and exhalations, my mother released my hand and closed her eyes for the last time. I had escorted her to death, and to her rebirthing.

Farewell, for now, my dearest friend.

—*Joe Postove, Norfolk, Virginia is a former radio talk show host and occasional writer. His mother has been the most important influence on his life and writing.*



Threads of Hope in the Mystery

A Journal of Three Weeks

Deborah Good

Entry #1

Two days ago, my life changed. It was 3:55 p.m. on Wednesday, January 26. I was standing next to my dad, who lay on a stretcher in a hallway at Washington Hospital Center. Dad had been in severe pain for about two weeks, and after many doctor’s visits and several diagnoses—the current one being a bulging disc and pinched nerve in his back—we had brought him to the emergency room because of a fever. A mysterious fever that could not be explained.

So here I was, 3:55 p.m., preparing to leave the hospital to catch a train to Philadelphia, where I have been living for two years, when Doctor Noel approached us. The CT scan taken two hours earlier, she said, showed a large mass on his left adrenal gland, and spots in his lungs and liver. Cancer.

Entry #2

On her way home from the hospital yesterday, my mom was behind a truck when she heard a strange

honking. *Is that truck making that odd honking noise, she asked herself, or are there really wild geese nearby?* She looked up, and there they were: Wild geese in perfect V formation were flying very low over the row houses of northwest Washington, D.C. And she was grateful.

Mary Oliver's poem "Wild Geese" hangs on my friend's wall, and now inside me. Our family read it to each other in the hospital several times. "Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine," we read. "Meanwhile the world goes on. . . . Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air, are heading home again."

Entry #3

My eyes hurt from all the tears and lack of sleep. I am still reeling. They say everyone copes with these things differently. Apparently one of my coping mechanisms is to busy myself with practical details. I call my uncle with the day's update. I e-mail a family friend who has offered to coordinate our meals, which start appearing in our refrigerator every few days. I shovel the snow off our back steps.

It feels good to be *doing* something. Maybe it's my attempt to create order when all else is out of my control. I wonder if it looks like I'm on top of things. Really, I am breaking.

I cope, too, by getting myself plugged into the sprawling peopleweb that surrounds us. Every night, I check e-mail—my parents' and my own. "You are in our thoughts constantly," writes one friend. "Has any-

one offered to help with laundry yet?" writes another. "Do you have a field we could plow? A barn we could build?"

By the time I graduated from college, I had heard the word *community* so often it was enough to make me roll my eyes. But this week, community has felt more real to me than ever before.

Throughout his life, my dad has consciously nurtured the communities to which he belongs. He understands that goodhearted people don't simply decide to up and change the world by themselves. He believes that when we intentionally bring people together, we create the space for ideas to grow, for groups to decide to do radical things—like start schools for troubled kids in inner-city D.C. or retreat centers in mountainous West Virginia—and then provide support for each other when things get rough.

The communities of people my dad has helped to cultivate are now walking with us, sending countless cards and emails, doing our grocery shopping and laundry. We are surrounded by love and by the desperate prayers of many people.

Lesson of the moment: I am not a little autonomous being, deciding this and that about my own life without interference. I am a thread in a tapestry of people, and should I ever forget my interconnectedness with the world, I will be lost.

Entry #4

It feels like a death sentence. And part of all of us knows that it probably

is. What do you do with such a thing?

In seventh grade, Mr. Hughes, my homeroom teacher, succeeded in making an impression on all of us who sat before him, intimidated by our first day of junior high school. "You're all going to die someday," he told us. Indeed we will. The difference between me and my dad, then, is that he has a better idea how he might go.

My dad says death is not something he's thought enough about. Perhaps most of us could say the same. And tonight, I consider writing about death—as an idea, a scientific process, a theological concept—but I find myself wanting to write instead about mystery.

I have been reading up on adrenocortical cancer (ACC). I can tell you where the adrenal glands are located in the body and that ACC is most likely to spread (or "metastasize") first to the lungs and liver. I can tell you that only one in two million people get the disease and that the drug most commonly used to treat it is called Mitotane.

In the end, though, no one understands why some bodies respond to the drug while most don't. In the end, no one knows why the cancer kills some people and leaves others to live a few years longer. In the end, we know so very little. Our bodies remain mysterious even in the twenty-first century. My little threads of hope rest in that mystery.

And when we each breathe our last, I have to say, honestly, I really don't know what happens. Clouds and angels? Eternal inner peace? Absolutely nothing?

I happily allow others their certainties about the afterlife—heaven, hell, neither, both, something else altogether. I prefer living with the mystery of it all, with an almost childlike curiosity about what will be there, on the other side of that quiet passage.

Entry #5

It's Valentine's Day, and our downstairs neighbors decide to provide a candlelit dinner for my parents. They bring up flowers, tall candlesticks, and place settings for two. It's beautiful. After the main course, Mom calls me to say that Dad has gone to rest for a bit, and now she sits, staring across the table at an empty chair. "No, no, no. Don't do that," I tell her. She decides to go to the computer and write an e-mail.

Entry #6

We do not know what tomorrow will bring. Nor the day after. Meanwhile, I will be here, next to my dad, holding my mom, afraid, angry, and praying my heart out. Meanwhile, I believe that all of everything—atoms, cells, and galaxies—spin in the arms of Love and Grace, and that most everything else is mystery. "Meanwhile, the world goes on. . . . Meanwhile, wild geese, high in the clean blue air, are heading home again."

—Deborah Good, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, is with her parents in Washington, D.C., indefinitely as they brace for the fight ahead. She invites your prayers for her dad, Nelson, and welcomes your emails at deborahagood@gmail.com.

The Story of the Man Who Loved Much and Lost Little

Michael A. King

This is the story of a man who loved much and lost little. He lost little because he loved so much that whenever he lost still there was something else left to love. But that's the end of the story, not the beginning. At the beginning of the story, this was a man who lost much and loved little. So what is the story of how the man got from one to the other?

It's really a short and simple story. He grew older. And older. And even older. And with each leap of aging he loved more and lost less. It's as simple as that.

What did age have to do with it, though? Maybe that much more of the story needs a word or two of explanation. Here: Each leap of aging came after the man had been hammered and hurt by life. And with each hammer, and each hurt, the man grew happier. It's as simple as that.

Of course, perhaps it would be helpful to say just a word or two about how hammering and hurting led to happiness. Here: Before the man was hammered and hurt, he wanted to be bigger and bigger and better and better. There was nothing wrong with this man. That's

really what most men want, to be bigger and better. That's why this man and so many men dream of things like being the home run king or the President of the United States or the first man on Mars. Bigger and better, whatever it is.

But the hammering and the hurt made him not smaller and smaller, exactly, but, how to put it, more leathery maybe. More leathery. And that's why it led to happiness.

But if that's still too cryptic, here: Leathery means weathered, no-frills, close to the earth, burned by sun and wind, chapped and wrinkled skin, few pretenses. What is is what is. What you see is what you get. Leathery means in this case not the worst of the old Western cowboy myth—which itself was one more variation on bigger and better, larger, meaner—but the best.

When you get leathery, you get happy. Not because you're no longer hammered. Not because you no longer hurt. You still do. And some of the hammering and the hurt get worse, because the leaps of aging make you smaller and smaller, like you remember happening to your father, who started out so big and strong and handsome and then as the ending drew nearer got smaller and smaller, bent, limping, holding onto the handrails. That hurt to see. That was a

hammer. And it hurts to feel the hammer hammering you down to a size like that.

But what if the point of your life isn't bigger and better? What if the point of your life—in the mystery and tragedy and grandeur that is the human story—is to become more you? What if becoming more you is, precisely, to little by little let go of being bigger and bigger and let yourself become smaller and smaller if that's what it means to be you as the leaps draw you closer to the end?

And what if within the mystery of it all it turns out that the closer to being you you are, the happier you are? Then it could actually make sense that to be hammered and to hurt is to be happy. That's what happened to the man in the story.

Is it a story with a happy ending? It depends on whether you believe in it. If you believe bigger and better is the only happy ending, then this is a tragic story and not redeemable. But if you believe being you could be a happy ending, then this story just gets happier and happier right to the end.

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

What if becoming more you is . . . to little by little let go of being bigger and bigger and let yourself become smaller and smaller if that's what it means to be you. . . ?

In Search of Discomfort

Renee Gehman

“Wouldn’t it be nice if there was an easy button for life?” So the question is posed in a Staples commercial. In 30 seconds, the ad presents various overwhelmed people in challenging situations, including a boy who does not know the answer to a teacher’s question, a father faced with the soiled diapers of infant twins, and a surgeon performing an unusual operation. In each case, the task is mastered with the simple touch of a large red “easy button,” and all live happily ever after.

A bit ridiculous, yes, but it is precisely this “quick fix” that our culture strives for in every aspect of life. For the sluggish exerciser there is now “Six-Second Abs,” which claims to be 15 times more effective than a standard abdominal routine. For the weary-handed in the kitchen, we have the Eggstractor, a device that effortlessly pops shells off hard-boiled eggs. Clap-on lamps, diet pills, instant mashed potatoes, and Cliff’s Notes are all products created solely to provide an easy means to a wanted end.

My aim is not to establish myself as anti-progressive; in fact, I heartily embrace such helpful inventions as the drive-through car wash, just-add-water

recipes, and ice-melting spray for windshields. My concern, though, is that in this continual development of comfortable alternatives, we are missing out on the value of discomfort.

If anyone knows discomfort, it is my friend Prashan. He currently attends Gordon College, but he grew up in Sri Lanka and was home for Christmas when the tsunami hit. In Sri Lanka, only one percent of the population is Christian (60 percent are Buddhist and the rest are mostly Hindu or Muslim). As the son of a pastor who started a church-planting movement, Prashan has experienced a life of persecution in which churches have been burnt down and pastors beaten or killed. Even as the Christian population grows, so does the hostility toward Christians.

“The church is not the place to be if you are not really committed to the Lord,” says Prashan. “Coming to the church itself is going against a lot of people. Your life is on the line.”

Between struggling against religious persecution, an unstable government, and now the devastation of the land, people, and economy of his country, Prashan has not led a comfortable life. No “easy buttons” were offered to him. No quick fixes.

But having been in America for almost a year now, Prashan shows little regret for the difficulties he has faced. In America “people have the privilege of living a Christian life without hindrances or persecution, most of the time,” he says. “But that, I fear, is a

disadvantage to people here, because it makes it easier for them to lose the intensity of their relationship with the Lord. I am grateful that, even though our country has to go through some difficult times—and due to its Christian commitments the church has to go through difficult times—the people’s faith in God is real.”

So I think about my own faith, and I wonder if I may be relying on easy buttons. I was raised Mennonite as part of a community in which most others were also Mennonite. I go to church on Sundays; there my participation is mostly as a spectator. I read the Bible and do devotional journaling as often as I remember to fit it into my schedule. And I can count my non-Christian friends on one hand.

In fact the uncomfortable, difficult situations have stirred most of my spiritual growth. A prime example: When I came to Gordon College, no one really knew what a Mennonite was. I had never really been in a situation in which I had to explain my beliefs. Suddenly people were basing their entire perception of “Mennonite” on how I explained it.

This was not a responsibility I was comfortable accepting! But I saw no easy way out, and so for the first time in my life I found myself seeking out information on Mennonite history and the contemporary Mennonite church. In facing an uncomfortable situation head-on, I improved my ability to articulate my beliefs. This

I think about my own faith, and I wonder if I may be relying on easy buttons.

has been valuable for me as well as for my peers—who previously associated Mennonites with anything from Mormons to Jehovah’s Witnesses to the black Amish. All I needed to prompt this development in my spiritual life was to step outside of my comfort zone, where life had been easy.

So while my friend Prashan has been an inspiration for me, I recognize that it is not necessary for me to pack my bags, head off to a country where Christians are persecuted, and develop a circle of Buddhist friends. Something as small as sharing a cup of tea and chatting with a friend whose perspectives differ from mine can be of great value. The point is to be cognizant of when we may be relying too heavily on “easy buttons,” whether in

our spiritual lives, the work environment, or in any other area.

The people in the Staples commercial were comfortable—but had learned nothing. There was no permanent gain. To grow, we must compel ourselves to accept the discomfort of growing pains. Because there is value in knowing how to change your baby’s diapers. There is value in hard work. And there is value in recognizing that to live in hiding from discomforting challenges is to experience an illusory and impermanent “happily ever after.”

—*Renee Gehman, Souderton, Pennsylvania, is a junior at Gordon College in Massachusetts and assistant editor, DreamSeeker Magazine.*



Anime

Cartoon Bridges Between East and West

David Greiser

An advantage of having a 17-year-old son is the access he affords me to genres of film that I would not otherwise have explored. Like most rationalistic American adults, I have always thought of comic books and cartoons as properly belonging to a child’s world. Thanks to a son who is enamored with Japanese cinema and superhero comics, as well as a movie market that is grudgingly opening up to independent and international films, I have been exposed to a strange and wonderful new world—the world of *Anime*.

In simple terms, Anime (pronounced ah-nee-meh) is Japanese animation. Japanese animation is marked by a distinctive style. Westerners immediately notice the stylistically enlarged eyes of the characters, the carefully (and often beautifully) crafted detail, and the somewhat more limited attention to the action and movement of the characters.

Most Americans have been exposed to at least one example of this art form—the popular 1970s cartoon series “Speed Racer.” In Japan (so I have heard) animation and comic books are as interesting to adults as they are to children. One is as likely to see adults on the

subway reading comic books as to see them reading newspapers or novels. Having sampled some of the genre called Anime, I now understand why.

The subject matter of Anime runs the gamut, from fantasy, to martial arts, to stories with levels of violence and sexuality that are totally inappropriate for kids. Whatever the subject matter, a well-crafted Anime film contains several features that have broad-based appeal, and that differentiate the style from Disney-type animation:

Complex plots. The typical Anime feature-length film contains a great number of plot twists and a storyline that is less predictable than many American films.

Detailed artwork. Japanese animators are less enamored with computer graphics and fluid motion. They are more concerned with detailed scenery and characters drawn to fit their environments. Part of the fun of watching Anime is looking for the tiny details painted into the background of the action.

Intense emotions. Watching Anime can be a deeply emotional experience. Anime filmmakers are, on the whole, less concerned with the clever or humorous and more interested in evoking the feelings latent in the audience.

In Japan, Anime is found on network television and advertising as well as in feature-length films. There is also a large market for OVA's (Original Animation Videos), a sort of hy-

brid of television episode and feature film released directly to video.

While there are dozens of gifted Anime film creators, two artists/directors deserve special note. The first is Dr. Osamu Tezuka (1926-), the so-called Walt Disney of Japan. Tezuka is easily the most prolific producer of Anime films in the world. He is credited with a body of work that has not only defined the genre of Anime but also continues to expand the art form into new permutations as the capabilities of computer graphics evolve. Unfortunately, little of

Tezuka's work has been adapted or distributed for English-speaking audiences.

A second master of the genre, Hayao Miyazaki, is the creator of the best-known Anime feature film distributed in the West. "Spirited Away" (2002) earned over \$230 million in Japan before its Western debut at the Berlin Film Festival, where it took top honors. Though the American version of the film has been dubbed rather than subtitled, the film retains a distinctively Eastern pace, with periods of silence and a brooding tone that is very different from American-type animation.

"Spirited Away" tells the story of Chihiro, a 10-year-old girl reluctantly moving with her parents to a new town. Along the way the family inadvertently happens upon an abandoned theme park inhabited by spirits. In the center of the park is a

huge bathhouse to which the spirits come to be rejuvenated. The spirits turn Chihiro's parents into pigs, and Chihiro becomes a worker-slave in the bathhouse while trying to figure out how to break the spell that will release her parents and return the family to its journey.

Along the way, Chihiro is aided by some friendly and often grotesque-looking spirits (such as the eight-armed curmudgeon who runs the boiler room). She develops a persevering selflessness as she struggles to survive and rescue her family.

Critics have compared "Spirited Away" to "Alice in Wonderland," since it involves a young girl who has fallen into a world of odd creatures and unusual rules. The parallels are numerous, but the film is actually a

contemporary kind of fairy tale. There is a subtle environmental message in the cleansing of a "Stink-spirit" from a river. And in the transformation of pampered Chihiro into a woman of substance, there is a less subtle message for affluent parents and spoiled children.

If you are a film lover who normally avoids animated features, I encourage you to break your fast and rent "Spirited Away." It will feed your spirit, fire your imagination, and introduce you to Anime, a sensitively intelligent and creative art form.

—*When not watching movies or arguing with his son about them, Dave Greiser is pastor of Souderton (Pa.) Mennonite Church and teaches part-time at Eastern Baptist Seminary.*



The subject matter of Anime runs the gamut, from fantasy, to martial arts, to stories with levels of violence and sexuality that are totally inappropriate for kids.

To Be a Saint

A Review of
The Saints' Guide to Happiness

Daniel Hertzler

The Saints' Guide to Happiness by Robert Ellsberg.
North Point Press, 2003.

I found Robert Ellsberg's book at the end of a list of books on the saints which began with that ancient classic, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, by Brother Lawrence. As a recent publication by the son of Daniel Ellsberg, Robert's book looked interesting. As I was to find, it is a compilation based on the fact that he "has spent much of my life reading about the saints" (189).

I have been wary of saints and sainthood. Maybe, if I'm honest, I will acknowledge that I fear their example will lay on me a burden I'm unwilling to bear. But I've heard also about the medieval system against which my Anabaptist forebears rebelled. I understand that it was a compartmentalized system: Some were to be saints who do the right things; others were ordinary people expected to do the dirty work while following less than saintly ethics. In contrast I've understood that all Christians are expected to be saints in line with Paul's opening words in Romans 1:7: "To all of God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints."

I found no article on "Saints" in *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, but H. S. Bender wrote one on "sanctification." He showed concern about the danger of perfectionism as found in some branches of Wesleyan theology. Yet he affirmed that "the insistence on real sanctification of life and true holy living is a major basic Anabaptist concept" (Vol. 4, 415).

But even if we insist that all Christians should be saints, we have to agree that some will be better able to express their vision in writing than others. It is such persons whose work is surveyed in *The Saints' Guide to Happiness*.

Dorothy Day was the saint Ellsberg knew best. As a young person in search of life's meaning, he came to the Catholic Worker house and lived there during the final years of Day's life. Eventually he joined the Catholic church.

His book is organized as a series of learning exercises. Each chapter title uses the word *learning*. He explains that "The 'lessons' in this book are rooted not in my own wisdom or in any personal claim to holiness, but only in my own questions and my own search" (xvi).

He takes considerable space in the preface to justify his emphasis on happiness and points out that "Deep in the heart of every person is a longing for happiness" (ix). He notes the common tendency to see happiness as a feeling and asserts that the Beatitudes

of Matthew 5 "are not about feeling at all. They are about sharing in the life and spirit—the happiness—of God" (xi). He affirms that "the theme of

"The theme of happiness runs like a silver thread through the Christian tradition, especially in the wisdom of its prime exponents, those holy men and women known as saints."

happiness runs like a silver thread through the Christian tradition, especially in the wisdom of its prime exponents, those holy men and women known as saints" (xii).

And so the search begins, and the report is organized under eight topics beginning with "Learning to Be Alive." What is to be learned from which saints? Be-

cause of the comprehensive nature of the book I find it difficult to generalize its message. There seems nothing better to do than to walk through it chapter by chapter.

Ellsberg illustrates "Learning to Be Alive" with a contemporary saint, James Martin, who changed from "the corporate world to a life rooted in traditional vows of poverty and chastity" (16). In this chapter he includes even Henry David Thoreau, of whom he says his "words resonate with the ancient challenge to wake up, shake off the coils of slumber, to learn how to be more fully alive" (19).

In "Learning to Let Go" Ellsberg features St Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) who "turned worldly values upside-down. Where others saw security, he saw only captivity; what for others represented success was for him a source of strife" (29).

St. Benedict (who died about 550) illustrates "Learning to Work." He

“directed in his rule that each day should be carefully divided among prayer, study, and work, whether copying manuscripts, tending to the kitchen, or laboring in the fields. None of these tasks was more important than another” (42). Some have seen an affinity between Anabaptism and the Benedictine rule in that Michael Sattler had been a prior of a Benedictine monastery before he became an Anabaptist.

The desert fathers are called on to illustrate “Learning to Sit Still.” They “developed a practice of mindful prayer centered on the repetition of holy phrases or even the name of Jesus.” An example is the Jesus prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ, son of the Living God, have mercy on me, a sinner,” sometimes recited in coordination with their breathing” (68).

Dorothy Day is one of those featured in “Learning to Love.” She is presented as one who loved first on a natural level while on the way to becoming a saint. Ellsberg observes that Day’s “love for Forster [her common law companion], for her daughter, for the beauty of the earth, and her love for the poor and downtrodden had brought her to believe in an even greater love” (84-85).

The Catholic Worker practice of taking in anyone who came sometimes created tension within the group. “Apparently if Dorothy Day could love so many apparently unlovable people, it was simply because she tried harder” (97).

The theme of happiness is tested most in chapters 6 and 7, “Learning to Suffer” and “Learning to Die.” Is there to be happiness in suffering? “In not a few cases suffering played a crucial role in a saint’s conversion or the discernment of a vocation” (109).

The list of those who endured suffering joyfully ranges from ancient to modern. Julian of Norwich prayed for an illness so that she might understand the passion of Christ. Flannery O’Connor had lupus. “Her illness imposed a discipline and sense of priorities that she managed to turn to the advantage of her art” (117). Sheila Cassidy was a physician from England arrested and tortured in Chile because she had treated a wounded revolutionary. She learned to abandon herself “into the hands of God” (123).

“Here is perhaps the most troubling lesson the saints teach us, yet the most crucial in our consideration of happiness. We have limited control over the circumstances of our lives. But we have the power in every circumstance to shape our attitudes” (135-136).

In “Learning to Die” Ellsberg reports that “The saints believed in eternal life because they had, in some sense, already touched it” (140). He adds that “By living in mindfulness of the value and urgency of each moment [the saints] maintained an acute awareness of themselves and all that was at stake. The fear of death no longer confined them” (157).

Examples include Martin Luther King Jr., who was well aware of the

possibility of assassination, and Cardinal Bernardin, who looked death from cancer in the face. He concludes that “Death will finish the job which we have left incomplete” (168).

Ellsberg then moves to “Learning to See.” He writes of the experience of the disciples at Jesus’ Transfiguration. “In the typical life such epiphanies come infrequently if at all, and that is probably for the best. Most of us are no more equipped to face the naked truth than we are to stare at the sun” (178). So perhaps to be a saint is not to be really different from other people except in being more sensitive to life’s opportunities and responding to them.

In his concluding chapter Ellsberg asserts that the saints “have shown that the true happiness we all desire is the other side of the holiness to which we are called. The two proceed from the same practice and converge on the same goal” (190).

Is this a call to everyone? In the end, “If the canonized saints are the

prodigies of the spiritual life, not everyone is called to be a prodigy. . . . But in walking this path worn smooth by the steps of many other saints, we find ourselves on the way to happiness. . . . Like any other great enterprise, this journey always begins with the first step” (197).

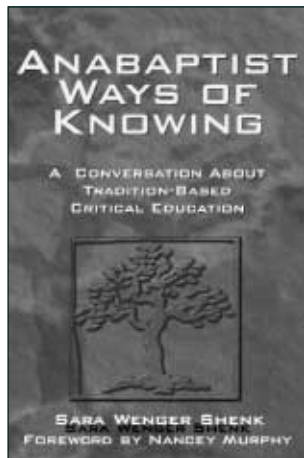
So there we have it. Sainthood is not a specialized calling. Any of us can be a saint. All that is required is for us to pay attention and open ourselves to the divine energy. H. S. Bender would surely approve.

—Daniel Hertzler, *Scottsdale, Pennsylvania, a longtime editor and writer, contributes a monthly column to the Daily Courier (Connellsville, Pa.). He says that if he had to be a real saint, he would want to be a Benedictine because Benedict affirmed both worship and work. The Rohrer’s seed catalog arrived about the time he finished this review, and visions of the new gardening year appeared in his head.*

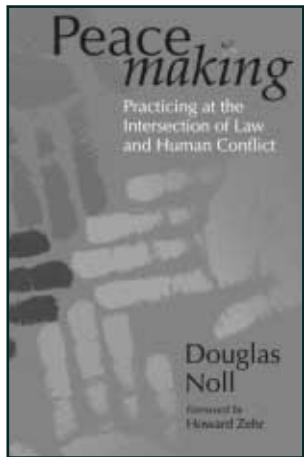


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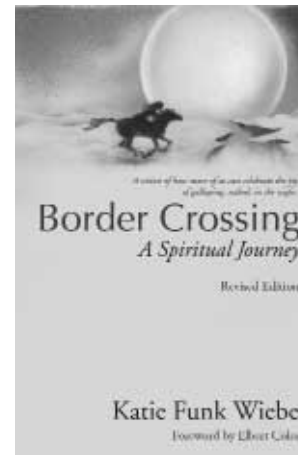


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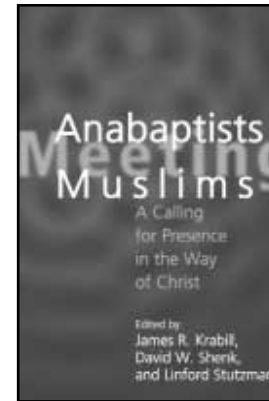
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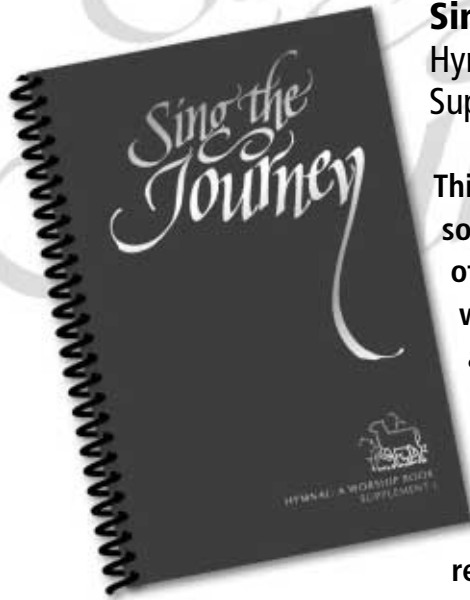
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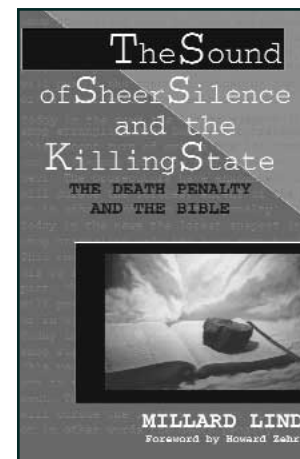


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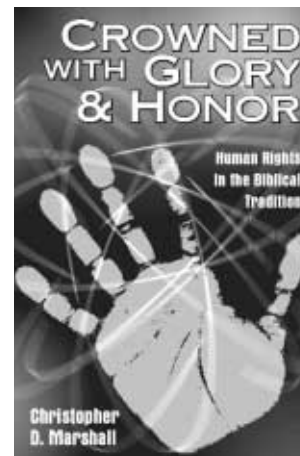
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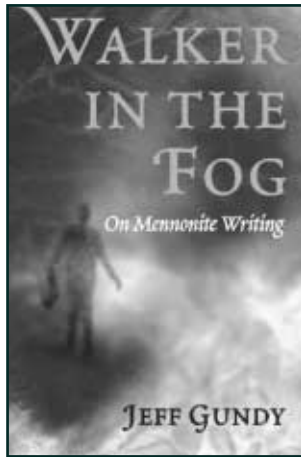


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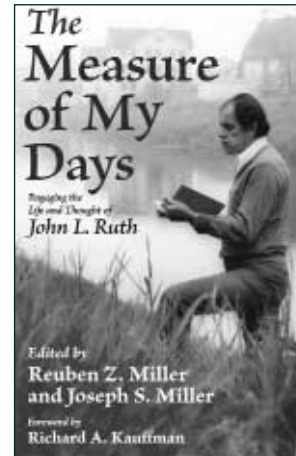


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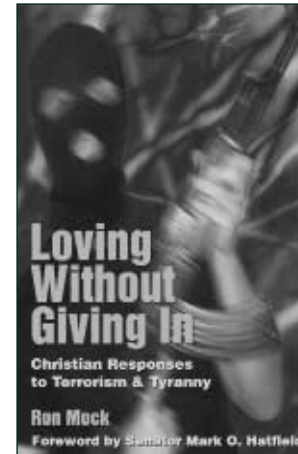
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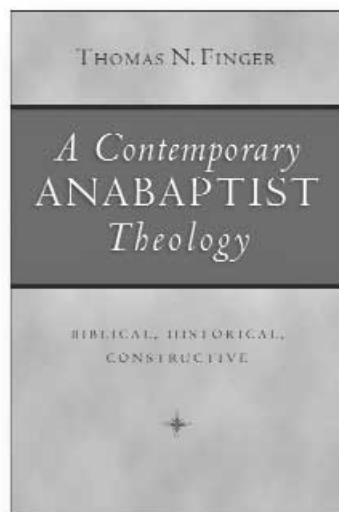
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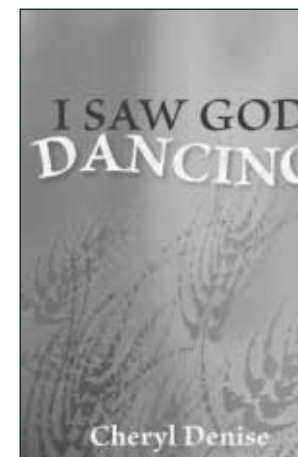


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Hydrangea

I stayed at my parent's house the day
before Mom's surgery.
At midnight there was a storm—
hard rain and lightning.
I awakened and thought, This
storm is our life. Here we are, walking into
the storm.

The prayers had been said
and my mother's forehead still wore
the anointing oil—
I don't want to do this, she kept saying.
My brave words, and our future
were drowned out with the thunder.

Back home, days later, I cut
all the hydrangea
blossoms from the bush she
gave this year for my birthday.
I want to save them and remember
how it was that afternoon—how she smiled
and we sang hymns,
sitting at the dining room table,
her face was soft and
beautiful, as we waited
for what would happen next.

—*Joanne Lehman, Apple Creek, Ohio, has had essays and poems published in local newspapers, literary magazines, and religious and rural life publications. Lehman and her husband Ralph have two grown children and four grandchildren.*

From *Morning Song* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2005).
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