

DreamSeeker Magazine

Voices from the Soul



Marginalia

*On Being a Gen-X Feminist Who Finds
Herself Pregnant and Without a Real Job*
Valerie Weaver-Zercher

Making the Man, Shaping the Faith

Steve Kriss

The Fish of Life

Tina Burkholder

Release the Eagle: A Fable of Discovery

Paul Wendell Souder

Being a Missional Church

James M. Lapp

Going Home to the City

Jessica King

and much more

Summer 2001

Volume 1, Number 1

Editorial: In the Beginning

Words, words, and more words. Creeks and rivers of words spilling from countless books and magazines and the endless Internet, flooding into that rising ocean of words that threaten to drown us all. Now even more words from *Dream-Seeker Magazine*. Why add to the deluge?

Because always we lovers of words sense somewhere still echoing in us those verses of Genesis which tell us that, confronted with the void, God spoke the words that set creation in motion. Then God told us to continue creation by naming what God had spoken into being.

So we do. No matter how many words spew forth, uselessly enough more often than not, still we ache to find some part of the void until now untouched by human words and from it help call into being yet more new worlds.

This is not to imply the words in *DSM* are better than those elsewhere. Rather, the hope is simply that even amid the risk of too many words, always there is fresh dreaming to be done.

As *DSM* editor, I'll be guided by the conviction that amid the many Anabaptist magazines already publishing fine visions, there is room for another dedicated to publishing

“voices from the soul,” meaning writers aching to share passionate and personal dreams of how the void has been or could be shaped into a new creation.

Commenting in *The New York Times Book Review* (Jan. 7, 2001, p. 35) on “The Big Chill” in writing, Roxana Robinson contends that

No matter how many words spew forth . . . still we ache to find some part of the void until now untouched by human words.

whereas a century ago books throbbed with emotion, now “passion is largely absent from our books: an icy chill has crept across the writer’s landscape.” She hopes that “in the new century we’ll rediscover

passion”; I agree—and hope *DSM* can be part of the quest.

DSM writing level will range from homespun simplicity through whatever depths a writer wants to explore without limiting audience to specialists. As can be seen in this first issue, style will include straightforward exposition yet with a tendency toward lyricism.

I’ll aim as editor to give *DSM* readers a reliable source of well-edited writing rooted in core Anabaptist or faith-related passions. I’ll also offer writers considerable latitude to decide for themselves what topics they must dream their way through and in what style to be true to their unique callings.

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Editor

Michael A. King

Assistant Editor

Valerie Weaver-Zercher

Editorial Council

David Graybill, Daniel Hertzler, Kristina M. King, Richard A. Kauffman, Paul M. Schrock

Columnists or Regular Contributors

Daniel Hertzler, Michael A. King, Valerie Weaver-Zercher

Publication, Printing, and Design

Pandora Press U.S.

Advertising

Michael A. King

Contact

126 Klingerman Road
Telford, PA 18969
1-215-723-9125
pandoraus@netreach.net

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I'll also work to keep DSM from drifting only toward the leftwing radicalism some see as the inevitable result of seeking new dreams. Surely there is as much fresh speaking to be done by those whose bent is conservative and who dream their way across the unexplored terrains of the traditional.

Roxana Robinson urges us to consider the possibility that even in—maybe especially in—a new millennium, “love still drives us; we still need it as the moving force in what we read.” Let the dreamseeking, heartfelt and passionate and filled with love, begin.

—*Michael A. King*

Letters

Since this is the first issue of *DreamSeeker Magazine*, we have of course received no letters in response to prior issues. However, we do anticipate publishing letters in future issues and welcome your replies, critical or affirming, to *DreamSeeker* articles as well as to *DSM* in general. As usual, brief letters are particularly welcome, as are letters e-mailed to pandoraus@netreach.net (which minimizes the need to retype). We reserve the right to edit letters of any length, but particularly longer ones.

We hope letters will be written in the spirit of the *DSM* articles, “from the soul,” and that they will tend to be not only responses but also passionate and personal continuations of conversations begun by *DSM* writers.

Until the magazine has established a track record and we have opportunity to see what number, length, and type of letters we receive, we will allot a flexible amount of space to letters. We look forward to hearing from you.

—*The Editors*

Rain

And a stray face spins me back to the black-haired girl
I saw long ago and stood helpless
watching her pass, bareheaded in the rain,
the easy way she found, wet but not hunched
against it, hair damp and shining on her brow,
her shoulders. I wanted to give something
for the dark rain of that hair,
the quiet of her face, not angry or restless,
alert to each step, the crowded sidewalk . . .
But what? Words? Dark rain. Wet face.

She never saw me. We've tramped on down
our own dark tunnels now for years. What hapless watcher
at my gates would know her face, would let her in
without the password, find her a bed, say rest,
sleep, I'll be outside?

I know. It shouldn't matter
who's lovely in the rain and who isn't.
But it's not beauty or nostalgia or even lust
that's got me, I don't know what it is,
justice maybe, prisons and churches, the glowing creatures
at the center of the sun. Most days I think
I'm almost free, I don't miss a single meeting,
I don't hit squirrels with my bike. Most days
it doesn't rain, and nobody walks the streets
in black hair, a light jacket and a glaze of shining water,
rain beading and touching her
all over like the hand of someone very large
and very gentle, very far away.

—*Jeff Gundy, Bluffton, Ohio, teaches at Bluffton College and
writes poems and essays.*

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Rhapsody with Dark Matter (Bottom Dog Press, 2000), p. 7.

On Being a Gen-X Feminist Who Finds Herself Pregnant and Without a Real Job

Valerie Weaver-Zercher

A box on our income tax return is what finally did it. Name, date, then the clincher: “occupation.” In my nine-month pregnant state, recently a graduate student, and now in some no-man’s (read: only women’s) land of “Interrupted Career but Not-Yet Motherhood,” I found myself cringing at a blank I used to fill in with pride. No longer “editor,” no longer “mediator,” no longer even “student,” I was forced to write that dreaded word that would define me to my government for at least this tax year: *homemaker*.

In my worst moments, I think I should have simply written “none.” Indeed, at these times even absence and void sound better than my chosen identity on that form. The term makes me feel re-

duced and shrunken anyway, so I might as well have abandoned any semblance of productive economic identity.

As I write this, I'm amazed at how offensive honest emotion can sound. Indeed, if I haven't offended anyone yet, I should have. After all, I'm one of those Gen-X feminists who have supposedly learned the lessons of our harried and overworked mothers: that to be a feminist you don't have to be both Super Career Woman and the Mom Who Bakes All The Family's Bread and Reads to Her Children for Four Hours a Day.

I'm a Mennonite who values simple living and family enough to carry a torch for men and women who choose to stay home with children rather than work 50 hours a week so that they can take their kids to Disney World or buy an SUV.

And I'm the daughter of a woman who has written "homemaker" on stacks of tax forms but whose leadership and activism in advancing women's rights in the church and society make the designation seem limp and confining.

So why my almost physical recoiling from taking the pen and writing "homemaker" on a form I'll never have to see again anyway? Why this gut-level revulsion at a term that, intellectually at least, I believe encompasses what Christians should be about: "making home" for others? How have I come

to scorn precisely the identities—"mother" and "homemaker"—that I, a well-reasoning adult, have for now chosen for myself?

Perhaps I've been duped: both by a few unreflective feminists who unwittingly denigrate women who work at home, and by a capitalist system that requires that we brand ourselves as economically useful. Perhaps. But I think the answer lies somewhere beyond the excesses of feminism and capitalism or their claims on my identity, or at least in some complex mixture of the two.

This will have to be a case of writing myself into the answers, of jumping into the abyss of an essay and not knowing where I will land. I find comfort in the fact that "essay" actually means "a way in," a path designed for exploration and query rather than a superhighway toward solution and coherence. By the time I finish this piece, I could be nursing my first child, a fact which could by itself remap this essay-ing path.

I'm sitting in my living room with five other women: three who have children, two who do not, and me, somewhere in-between. I feel like a pregnant fulcrum, holding the balance in our group for only a few more days before tipping toward those with children.

We're at the first meeting of our book group, which we've formed to discuss books about faith and spiri-

tuality. Even though we don't all know each other, there is that easy, turn-taking rhythm to our conversation that often emerges in groups of women.

Despite the relative ease of our conversation, however, I find myself growing tense whenever a mother mentions her children and the others chime in with child-related stories. I'm frustrated that a group of women can't have a conversation about books and God and all those traditionally male pursuits without someone reminding me that we all have vaginas and breasts, some of which have given birth to and nursed babies.

I'm angry at my own pregnant body for turning conversations even more toward motherhood. And I'm also painfully aware that one of the women who is not a mother recently had a miscarriage.

Then I find myself getting tense at the very fact that I'm getting tense. Children are a huge part of these mothers' reality—a reality I will be entering any day now, I remind myself—and why should they not bring the stuff of everyday life into discussions of faith? Indeed, isn't that what I believe "doing theology" is all about? Don't I view it as making connections between the daily and the divine?

And how can I assume a miscarriage automatically makes a woman

cry or take offense at hearing stories of other women's children? Doesn't that idea further position women's identities as wrapped up in their reproductive "abilities"?

Once again, as with the tax form, my frustration makes little logical sense. I want to stop resisting this "mother" identity, to stop lashing out in my mind against those who embrace it. I move in a liberated world, where equality of the genders is assumed in my marriage, my church, my friendship circles.

Why, then, this anger? I work to untangle the knot of the anger, to view more clearly the threads that form it. I then see that the thick threads of such forces as patriarchy, capitalism, and unredeemed feminism snarl together with the thinner ones of my own experiences.

These include the certainty of some people that I'll be the one to stay home; surely my husband wouldn't interrupt his career! The expectation that I'll get a job immediately, that I couldn't survive the intellectual impoverishment of homemaking. The assumptions of some that bearing children must fulfill a lifelong goal (my being a girl and all). The questions of those who wonder if I know how thoroughly child-rearing will tie me down.

Once again my frustration makes no logical sense. I want to stop resisting this "mother" identity, to stop lashing out in my mind against those who embrace it.

While I will never completely untangle the threads of this anger, I find some semblance of clarity and hope in “The Quotidian Mysteries: Laundry, Liturgy and ‘Women’s Work,’” a lecture that writer Kathleen Norris gave at Saint Mary’s College in 1998.

Norris acknowledges the risk of talking about things like laundry and dishes at a women’s college, since “educating women is meant to free us from being relegated to such thoroughly domestic roles, and it does,” she writes. “But the daily we have always with us, a nagging reminder that the dishes must be done, the floor mopped or vacuumed, the dirty laundry washed.”

Rather than scorn such ordinary, “homemaking” activities, Norris invites us to see them as pathways to God, times for contemplation and prayer. “A mature feminism recognizes that subjects such as cooking can be difficult for women to address, as they have so often been seen as insignificant ‘women’s work,’” Norris writes, “but it also asks us to recognize that their intimate nature makes them serious and important.”

I know what Norris is talking about. I too have known the peace and focus that come with kneading bread, the space my mind can make for God when I’m chopping potatoes for soup or ironing a shirt.

Yet I’m afraid to admit it. I fear acknowledging that I too can find

meaning in these tasks devalued for centuries because performed by women.

Here, brimming with child, how do I make my way toward a mature feminism, one that values both the difficulty of such an admission and a spirituality of the daily?

How do I hold more loosely to my anger? How do I grasp it tightly enough to remember the stunted opportunities of women past and present, yet loosely enough so that the light of God can shine through my fingers and into my dishwasher and laundry basket?

It will not be easy. I have learned the theorems of capitalism and patriarchy all too well: (1) activities which produce income are valuable; (2) women who work at home don’t produce income; thus (3) “women’s work” is not valuable.

I will have trouble erasing the lines of my adolescent feminism, which made room only for career advancement. And I worry about Norris’s idea of housework as spiritual discipline becoming one more way of cajoling women into finding “contentment” only in domesticity.

Yet I find hope in her refusal to fall into dualism, her rejection of forced choice between “the life of the mind and a life of repetitive, burdensome work.” And while the mundane tasks of our everyday lives do not define us, Norris observes, they can remind us that “Christian-

ity is inescapably down-to-earth and incarnational.”

There is grace here, I think—grace enough for a Gen-X feminist like me who finds herself pregnant, at home, without a real job. Grace enough for all of us, male and female, who desire to find meaning and hope—and perhaps even God—in our baskets full of dirty clothes and our sinks full of dishes.

I’m sitting on the futon, opening my mail, with my newborn son in my arms. He snuffles and squirms as I open the big brown envelope from my university and pull out my master’s diploma.

Suddenly its grand Latin phrases and self-important seal feel like messages from another life—a life I must have lived sometime before my reincarnation as diaper washer and milk machine. Who was the person who earned this degree, I wonder, who sat around in classrooms discussing poststructuralism and liberatory pedagogy? And what would she think of me, a baby in my lap and milk stains on my blouse?

Must I choose, I wonder as I glance from diploma to child, between a “life of the mind and life of repetitive, burdensome work,” as Norris puts it? I have hope that is a false dichotomy, a choice I will not need to make. I have hope that “repetition” can be salvaged as God-filled pattern and likewise “burdensome work” as redemptive labor.

Even with this hope, I imagine that I’ll still resent labeling myself on next year’s tax form, that I’ll still get frustrated when groups of women talk primarily of husbands and children. Indeed, millennia filled with social forces constraining women are not erased by one small epiphany of mine.

Yet I do hope my anger at labels and roles holds within it a seed of faith in the Word that made Itself flesh so as to experience the mundane and ordinary of this earth. I hope that my anger is infused with the peace that comes from knowing that God accompanies me in my daily routine—whether that includes sitting in a classroom, writing an essay, directing an organization, or changing a diaper.

Speaking of which. . . .

—Valerie Weaver-Zercher, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, is a homemaker and also assistant editor of and columnist for DreamSeeker Magazine.



Making the Man, Shaping the Faith

Steve Kriss

On Sunday, I strolled along 125th Street in Harlem for the first time. Recently many in the United States have become aware that Harlem isn't just for black folks anymore. Now the home of an Old Navy, Starbucks, Krispy Kreme, HMV, and the home office of Bill Clinton, Harlem represents the odd new homogeneity of a multiracial, multi-classed U.S. The inner city and the suburbs look oddly similar as racial lines and class boundaries are crossed by fashion, music, media, and culture.

We live in an unusual era of global economics and urbanization. With increasing numbers of the world population living in urban areas, the landscape is becoming more a global metropolitan area than a global village, marked by similar cultural and commercial trademarks. Youth from around the world can wear Tommy Hilfiger; listen to Jennifer Lopez, Snoop Dogg or Kid Rock; shop at the Gap or Old Navy (in person or online); eat McDonald's, Burger King, or Wendy's fries; and view the same Internet pages at the same time. Mass marketing

may be achieving what our best intentions never could. Rich and poor both shop at The Gap, wear Nikes and Timberlands, watch MTV.

Stores like Old Navy thrive on the cultural milieu of the turn of the millennium. The Harlem store is no different inside from a store in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Old Navy strives to achieve a culture of hipness where the divide is between fashionable and unfashionable rather than rich and poor. Here is a sort of cultural domination through fashion, clothes designed to fit into and to create the mainstream rather than to stand out amid it.

For Mennonites, long marked by distinctive dress—whether plain coats or prayer coverings—or for any Christians who have been committed to distinctive attire, Old Navy means we can blend in. No one will know I am a pacifist. No one knows I can sing acapella (well, at least sort of). No one knows I will try to bless rather than curse people who cut me off in traffic. I am culturally assimilated, at least by outward appearance.

Most days I am glad for the opportunity to be assimilated into a global metropolis. Living in New York I don't really have the need to stand out, to be noticed. After being in the city for two years, I am happy finally not to look like a tourist all the time. I may still gawk at the skyline, but I think I have learned how to walk decisively and

negotiate through crowds without looking anyone in the eye. I am at least dressing the part of assimilation.

I have used clothing as a passport. I have quietly blended into a culture that is not my own. In New York City, here under clothes with recognizable brand names, no one knows I grew up poor. No one knows I am attending school with a scholarship for Appalachian students. No one knows I am often uncomfortable on the campus of wealthy, suburban, and mostly Euro-American Drew University. I wear the clothes to get by, to fit in. I participate in this globalizing uniform that seeks to erase boundaries of class, culture, and uniqueness.

Mass-marketed clothing and brand name accessibility have created the uniform brought to you by The Gap. It seems to suggest a particular reality, an income level, a sense of security, a way of being. My clothing often suggests that I have arrived at the destination. I can at least dress the part, though I am not totally sure where I am and if I really want to be here.

The assumption is that clothing helps make the person. The tradition of distinctive Mennonite clothing highlights this point paradoxically. Clothing gives an outward identity that may or may not jive with experiences or inward reality. Places like The Gap and Old Navy

minimize obvious differences. I have chosen, often, to not let anyone know at first glance who I might be—to know that I grew up in a coal-mining town, to know that I am a follower of Christ who seeks to live a distinctive lifestyle.

I hide that I am from the Allegheny Mountains and grew up close to “rock dumps” in Scalp Level, Pennsylvania, where unemployment hovered around 30 percent for years. My dad was the only man in our neighborhood of several blocks who worked every day.

We lived in half a duplex with my grandparents. I shared a bedroom with my grandmother until I was about eight. At various times, other family members lived with us—uncles, aunts, cousins.

It wasn't until college, though, that I realized how poor we actually were. It wasn't until I read about poverty that I realized I might actually have been living it.

In high school I began to be aware of brand names—saving money to buy Nike shoes by skimping on meals on the way home after soccer games and insisting that I could only wear Levi's jeans. My purchases of brand-name clothing made me feel proud. I remember buying my first pair of Umbro shorts to wear for athletic events. I

wore them for the soccer season and gave them to another guy to wear for basketball. His dad only worked infrequently.

Brand-name clothing made me feel good. It was literally like slipping into someone else's skin. I was no longer the poor kid from Scalp Level but the same as others who shopped at the mall.

As a college student, I became more fashion conscious. Part of upward mobility is the ability to dress the part. Even at a Mennonite college, where peace, service, and justice were emphasized, few people ignored the lure of fashion or bucked the trends of J. Crew, The Gap, or Birkenstocks. I fell in love with TJ Maxx, Value

City, and outlet malls that helped me purchase my skin at discount prices.

As a Euro-American, clothing easily hides my identity. No one knows I have played in coal dirt or eaten government surplus cheese. No one knows I am a conscientious objector or at least would be in time of war. No one can tell I am increasingly uncomfortable with the idea of paying taxes that often go to support defense and military systems. No one knows I often question the working conditions of those who have made the very clothes that I

purchase, that I am a bit squeamish each time I pull a shirt off the rack that says “made in El Salvador.”

I hide behind a costume, bought from Jersey Gardens (the biggest outlet mall in New Jersey). No one really knows what I really know quietly in my heart.

My speech occasionally betrays me, like last Sunday when I preached, I said “creek” instead of “creek.” I have exchanged “younz” for “y'all,” a product of attending Eastern Mennonite University in Virginia. If I remain quiet, no one knows the truth. I think of the words of the prophet, “Rend not your clothing, but your hearts.”

As I write, I am aware of what I am wearing—jeans from J. Crew, shoes by Rockport, a sweatshirt from American Eagle Outfitters. No one can tell I grew up sleeping in a room with cracked and drafty walls. No one knows I can understand Slovak words, remnants of an Eastern European peasant culture that reside mostly in my bones and in my occasional meals of pierogies, kielbasa, halupkim, or halushki. No one can tell I am a Mennonite pastor, only licensed, definitely not ordained.

I am well hidden by a new skin, culturally assimilated to an often blasé middle-class reality that suggests that I have “made it.” Now, I drive a Honda SUV, walk the campus of an expensive school in New Jersey, and live in a reasonably nice

neighborhood close to the beach on Staten Island.

Don't get me wrong; I don't want to go back. I don't want to struggle, the way that my family did when I was young, to work hard in the steel mills like my grandfather. I have chosen to blend into academia and the urban environs of New York—and out of Appalachia. But often, I am uncomfortable. I hold up as heroes, persons who have denounced wealth for a simple lifestyle. I try to quietly choose what that might mean for me.

Increasingly, I hope that in these clothes (all bought on sale), I can speak from my experiences rather than hide them. I hope somehow I can proclaim the good news of justice and peace. I hope I can communicate a message of love and healing to a people hiding behind a sheen of cotton or polyester. I hope a message can flow from my lips and out of my actions that carefully suggests something beyond the Banana Republic, something about the community of the eternal reign of God, even though I wear cargo pants.

—Steve Kriss is a student at Drew University and a pastor at both Redeeming Grace Fellowship on Staten Island and Carpenter Park Mennonite Church in Davidsville, Pennsylvania. His heart is caught somewhere between the Allegheny Mountains and New York City.

The Fish of Life

Tina Burkholder

My spirit shifted last Thursday. I bought new fish for my tropical tank. I had always wanted a fish tank and several years ago my husband gave me one for Mother's Day. I dutifully if not meticulously learned how to maintain a healthy tank and have come to view it as a metaphor for my life. In other words, the tank takes energy to maintain—and so some months it looks more beautiful than others.

My pleasure in the tank, amid the daily routine of feeding and checking for any untimely deaths, has remained steady and somewhat nameless. Perhaps the closest description of my attachment to the tank and how it feeds my spirit is the feeling of awe mixed with deep gratitude I experience every time spring comes around and the crocuses bloom again—all on their own volition.

Perhaps I am responding to the way nature takes care of itself and offers itself to me as well as my own little part in keeping it going. I feed the fish and clean and balance the water. They swim around and are beautiful and secure.

Most recently, however, all the colorful tropical fish were long gone and I had been keeping the two

bottom feeders alive with the occasional lettuce pellet. They could have probably lived off the bacteria in the water itself, because, well, let it simply be said that my attention to the cleaning had grown less than admirable. The bottom feeders are the ugly, gray, morose-looking fish that are very shy and sneak up to suck the gunk off the glass in the dead of night, when no one is apt to see them.

Letting the fish tank die a natural death and closing the tank for good never really felt like an option. To let the fish tank go, to give it up, would be symbolically discouraging, if not downright demoralizing and depressing. I could not bear the suggestion that my life was so chaotic and busy, or conversely, so fallow and barren, that I had to shut down the living, colorful, innocence of the aquarium.

So I have agreed with myself that as long as the algae eaters are swimming, and even if they too die, I will not empty the tank. I will be content to wait for the right timing to replenish the water.

As part of that decision, I have discovered that God speaks even through tropical fish. The agency for which I work has been fighting the financial struggle of most non-

profits and coming up short. As I tossed around the possibilities and opportunities available to me in the face of work cutbacks, I made the comment to a friend that “I don't think God really cares where I work.” In the context of the conversation the comment made sense to me, and on some level I continue to believe this, but I was also struck at the sadness evoked in me as I considered my words.

Why the grief? Having found freedom to move away from the judgmental God of my childhood, I wondered if I was traveling toward a view of God that precluded God's involvement in my life at all.

I no longer believe God has a will for my life that I need to figure out or risk perishing in hell. My beliefs have been moving toward an understanding of God as a spirit within me; to become more “God-like” or “Christ-like” means becoming more of myself, not less—a striking shift from the Mennonite teachings of selflessness, servanthood, and “community at all costs.”

My childhood God was a loving father full of judgment and rules for the right way to live my life. A kind of childhood theme song for me was “Oh be careful little hands what you do. There's a Father up above looking down on you in love, so be care-

Having found freedom to move away from the judgmental God of my childhood, I wondered if I was traveling toward a view of God that precluded God's involvement in my life at all.

ful little hands what you do.” Thus the movement toward grace and wholeness and away from criticism and never being good enough has felt positive and truly of the Spirit.

Amid that movement, I still don't believe there is a “right” place for me to be, other than a place where I can work with integrity and meaning and a place that enables me to meet my responsibilities as a parent and family member. But my comment on God's lack of investment in how I spend 40-45 hours a week caught my attention. I realized it hadn't occurred to me that God might be a resource to me, could offer guidance, was perhaps able to see the larger picture. Seeking help, guidance, and nurture often doesn't occur to me in any area of my life. As I faced this, my spiritual solitude and independence saddened me; I questioned the direction of my journey. I began to wonder if I had thrown out the loving father with the judgmental bathwater.

Amid these swirling thoughts, I met with a good friend who listened to my anxiety about writing for his magazine. He assured me of his confidence in the words I might have to say and asked me simply to speak from my journey.

After begging for a prescription (i.e. theme), which Michael gently refused, I decided to leap into the pool and trust that either I could indeed swim or that somehow the water would buoy me.

As I ate lunch with Michael, I knew the time had come to buy the fish for my aquarium. On my way home I bought two black mollies, two red Mickey Mouse fish, and two ruolas.

I felt God's spirit within me and knew I had shifted and was grateful for the movement and for the sense of God's hand in my life.

But God had only begun with me. When I came downstairs two days later to check for dead fish (pessimist that I am), I was stunned to discover 16 baby Black Mollies. Over the next week, two more fish had babies. I now have 20-25 baby Black Mollies and Red Mickey Mouse fish playing merrily in the baby cage.

Someone asked me if I view these babies as a blessing. I can only grin and shake my head and say, “Let the waters roll down!”

—*Tina Burkholder, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, is Director of Foster Care and Adoption at Bethanna. She enjoys reading, gardening, music, and drama. Tina and husband Jay are raising three children.*



Release the Eagle

A Fable of Discovery

Paul Wendell Souder

My grandfather was the village potter. Three days before he died, he called all us grandchildren to his room. There around his bed the 12 of us gathered. His voice was still resonant, his gaze was still clear.

We shared stories, memories, tears. He shared his wisdom and left us with his blessing. And one final keepsake, which we cradled as we left his presence—a large clay jar with a small opening at the top, the work of his hands.

I put mine in a sunny corner, on a small table. It gave me comfort and helped me grieve his loss.

One final thing he said lingered like a riddle: “My dear ones, I will be leaving you soon. This jar of clay is my legacy to you. It is all I have, but it is more than enough. Guard it well, and when the time is right, you will know what to do.”

Oh, to have another day in Grandfather's shop. Harvesting the clay from the hillsides around the village. The musky smells of the earth as he prepared the clay on his giant outdoor table. Sitting on my stool by the wheel as he centered the moist

ball of clay, smoothing its wobble, causing it to be still while around it spun the wheel. His thumbs began the opening and stretching. The clay obeyed his strong, wet hands. Another pot was born to hold the water and grain of the village.

The scene I will tell you now, I am imagining. It is my way of answering the riddle. This much I do know—every evening when Grandfather's work was done, he lit his lamp, took down the scrolls from their shelf, and studied the Scriptures. More than lamplight filled that room—his mind was filled with grand visions of the kingdom of God. That is the only way to explain the riddle.

I can only imagine his look of amazement that day as his shovel opened the red hillside and a crystal glint first caught his eye. The shovel fell to his side. He knelt to examine the treasure, a clear stone, large as a cat curled in his arms. *What will I do with this stone of great value?*

That night by lamplight he read, "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings as eagles." And his mind soared. He remembered the stone hidden under his bed. *Aha! Now I have a gift worthy of my vision.*

I can see the jewel catching the lamplight, tossing rainbow fragments around his simple room. And in an act of faith, he took his tools,

mere pottery knives and blades. Yet guided by his clear vision and his strong hands, they cut into the stone like wax.

The light of a new morning streamed through his window and fell on his creation. Every feather in its jeweled place, the eagle seemed to hover on the wind. *Your rightful place is in the heavens*, Grandfather must have thought as he wrapped the crystal eagle in a cloth and placed it gently under his bed. *I am not a man of words. But with my hands, I have tried to capture one small glimpse of the kingdom of God.*

That day, renewed by his work of the night, he had the energy of a young man as he shaped strong pots of clay. And that afternoon another jewel, as large as the first, fell from the hillside.

This went on for some time. He worked as a potter by day with his hands in the clay. Then every night by the light of his lamp he fashioned visions of beauty from the clear stones he unearthed. He poured his life into those stones. They were his joy, his bliss.

He had to know that his years with us were coming to an end. I can imagine him at the wheel for the last time, creating his final jars of simple beauty. His skilled hands drew the walls of the jar up from that moist ball of clay. Half finished, he stopped the wheel. He unwrapped his crystal handiwork and

set each one in the middle of its jar. *You will be safe here*, he breathed a prayer as he finished the jar, drawing in the sides until only a small opening remained at the top.

And there it sat, safe in my jar in that sunny corner all these years.

Until that morning when in my haste of cleaning, I tipped the jar. And it spun. Like a wobbly top it spun on the table, but it did not fall. With every spin, a glint of light caught my eye.

I reached for the jar, held it close, and peered inside. The feathers of an outstretched wing, a jeweled eye, unblinking, caught the sunlight for the first time in years.

Then Grandfather's riddle returned to me: "This jar of clay is my legacy to you. It is all I have, but it

is more than enough. Guard it well, and when the time is right, you will know what to do."

With a brick, I tap, tap, tapped until the jar crumbled away.

Above the chards of broken clay, the eagle hovered on silent wings, a message of love from the throne of God. It reached across the chasm, touched a hidden place inside of me. And changed my life forever.

—Paul Wendell Souder, Harrisonburg, Virginia, is a communications consultant specializing in marketing and publications; he preached an earlier version of this fable at Lindale Mennonite Church. He and wife Donna are parents of four children.

Whole

They clipped my wings today
and asked why I didn't fly
I tried to explain to them
that part wouldn't work
I needed the whole
and they told me
But you still have wings
why don't you fly?

—Starla J. King, Ashburn, Virginia, helps organizations create and use virtual environments to increase their effectiveness. Poems are the work of her soul.

Being a Missional Church

Implications for Mennonite Conferences and Congregations

James M. Lapp

As we enter the twenty-first century, the Mennonite Church is joining many other denominations in clarifying its vision and has chosen to make missions its central thrust and focus. Such a commitment is in keeping with the scriptural mandate Jesus entrusted to the church and to Christians in every generation. But if we are serious about the great commission being the rallying cry for our corporate life and the congregations and institutions we serve, there will be serious implications and a price we must pay. Like the metaphor in the Gospels that Jesus used for the kingdom of God, do we see this call to mission as important enough that we will sell anything and risk everything to realize its fulfillment?

Ours is not the first generation of Mennonites to give high credence to the great commission of Jesus. Mennonite missiologist Wilbert Shenk and other writers describe the Anabaptists as a mission-

ary movement for which the charter was the great commission. Shenk documents the turn from a mission orientation to maintenance and self-preservation among Mennonites and boldly asserts that “to recapture the Anabaptist vision we must above all else embrace a missionary consciousness” (*By Faith They Went Out*, 2000).

Appropriately the leaders of what is being called “transformation” (whereby two denominational streams are moving toward merger as the Mennonite Church USA) seek to make missionary consciousness an ingredient in the new church in the process of being born.

To embrace mission at the center of our church will raise questions and challenges heretofore avoided. These may be worth noting not only for the sake of Mennonites wrestling with missional transformation but also as a record potentially useful to any Christians sharing this quest to get “out of the Christian ghetto,” as a conference sponsored by Mars Hill Graduate School recently put it.

Hopefully the great commandment of Jesus to love will go hand-in-hand with a fresh missional perspective. But there will be no sidestepping some difficult matters we might wish could remain off to the side. Yet what could be a more fertile environment for addressing certain weighty aspects of our faith than in the context of mission?

In particular, I see Mennonite commitment to the great commission as “costing” us the following ingredients:

Our Sense of Family

In many of our churches we have a pervasive sense of being family that grows out of strong biological family connections, a historically homogenous cultural heritage, and an ecclesiology that emphasizes relationships of mutuality and care. This has served us well for generations, although it likely has limited our mission/outreach at times.

To take the great commission seriously will require a basic redefinition of who we are and readiness to address the various factors that make it hard for people from different backgrounds to be assimilated into the life of our denomination and our congregations. Many of our congregations have not yet faced this reality. We want to preserve a warm sense of “family” while also being evangelistic.

I suspect we can’t have it both ways, at least as things are currently defined. To say “our family can be your family” (as Mennonite Board of Missions has at times advertised) has a good ring but suggests people need to join someone else’s family. Can we learn to be family with new people rather than ask others to fit our current family systems? Are we prepared to pay the price of family as we have known and experienced

it to make the great commission central to our life as a church?

Our Polity of Control

Particularly the polity of many of our older conferences or districts (clusters or congregations) assumes a high degree of sameness or conformity and corporate control over how faith is expressed in the lives of members. This perspective needs to be reviewed and changed if the great commission is to be fully operative among us.

We have already moved far toward a congregationalism that allows some diversity among congregations. But we are uneasy about this change. Thus when anxiety arises, such as we are currently experiencing around the issue of homosexuality, our reflex is to shift into the old mode of “super” conference and to want to control or hold a deviant congregation in line.

In recent years, at least three cherished matters of faith and practice have come into question in our Mennonite Church with regard to standards of congregational membership:

- exclusion of Christian gays and lesbians who are living in a covenanted relationship;
- the expectation of a commitment to pacifism or nonresistance for all members;
- the necessity of adult, or believer’s, baptism for those baptized as infants and for whom

another baptism is sometimes objectionable.

A fourth issue which often proves contentious, and one that will be exacerbated by focus on mission, is growing diversity in worship styles, particularly in choice of music.

Tensions in these four areas exemplify challenges we confront, and will increasingly face, as the great commission guides us. Will we hold all congregations to a common standard on these and other matters of faith and practice?

At least two issues are at stake. First, we need to examine what it is that unites us as a denomination or as conferences of congregations. If it is not sameness or a common historical heritage, what holds us together? Is it our faith and common theology rather than our ethnicity and heritage?

If so, this raises a second issue. In our theology, is everything of equal importance? Or might we distinguish between “confessional” issues, which reflect some historical consensus in the Christian church and among Mennonites, and other issues on which we grant some latitude in the faith and practice of our congregations? Framing the issue this way does not eliminate the problem but would allow us to discern the type of issue we face and not elevate every concern to a confessional level.

Are we prepared to hold some issues as confessional and allow oth-

ers to be defined by Holy Spirit guidance in the local setting? Can we live with the reality that the Holy Spirit may seem to guide different congregations to different understandings on some matters? Might we identify some basic Anabaptist-Mennonite themes that are mandatory for adherence by leaders and congregations in our church and on other matters remain flexible?

Having proposed this way of sorting out issues, the fundamental concern is this: Will we remain in a control modality? Or will conferences move (as we already have in some matters) toward a relationship of trust and empowerment with congregations in which we allow them to discern and interpret the broad range of questions facing the church today?

Giving center stage to the great commission means we can only expect greater diversity in the style and patterns of congregational life and that increasingly complex issues will need attention. On which matters will we seek corporate agreement, and on which focus on relationships of “coaching” and nurture while respecting local outcomes?

My observation is that congregations welcome the new freedom they have to discern the faith for their members, but they become anxious when a sister congregation discerns the faith and practice differently than they do. At that point there is an appeal for the conference

to “provide leadership,” which seems to mean “take control” and discipline the other congregation.

There is comfort in discerning the issues in one’s own congregation, but limited trust in the capacity of other congregations to do the same hard work of spiritual discernment. And of course, we all want to select the issues in which “control” is needed. For the sake of mission, are we ready to relinquish control?

Our “Like Precious Faith” (Heritage)

Underlying who we are as a denomination, and in many of our congregations, is a deep respect and appreciation for the Anabaptist-Mennonite heritage of faith we have received from our forebears. Given the martyr tradition from which we have come, as well as the deeply cherished sense of being a “peculiar people,” this heritage of a “like precious faith” (common phraseology in eastern Pennsylvania conferences for the faith as we have received it) holds a place of deep importance to many of us.

Can we make the great commission central and still hold our heritage with the reverence we now give it? If Anabaptists were characterized as missionary people, might it be possible to be authentically Anabaptist without always embracing the Mennonite version of Anabaptism, with all its historical and cultural accretions?

How important will it be to remain “Mennonite” in our consciousness in the twenty-first century? Might some of our members wish to become Anabaptist and not adopt the stereotypical ways of being Mennonite? More challenging, might some of our people wish to be Mennonite and not Anabaptist or even Christian?

How will our pastors and congregations promote connections to a larger body (conference and denomination) among people who have no sense of a Mennonite tradition? If we allow the context to shape our faith and practice (as we seem to do in our worship patterns), and if greater inclusion of people into the body of Christ becomes the norm, what will happen to our predictable expressions of being Mennonite? Can we teach the basic tenets in the *Confession of Faith from a Mennonite Perspective* without assuming people need to feel a deep attachment to a Mennonite cultural way of life?

I expect this sense of being Mennonite, and our respect for heritage as some of us have known it, will be a price we will need to pay if the great commission is to be our core emphasis.

Mennonites espouse values and practices that are not particularly religious or scriptural, but which we nevertheless prize as a preferred way of life. Four-part harmony in singing, handiness in manual crafts

(including quilting), and “more with less cooking” might be examples of values we appreciate but may reflect a wholesome lifestyle rather than basic tenets of our faith.

Many people emulate and envy our practice of these. Can we be Mennonite and not retain these practices? Can we retain them and also be missional? Might these practices become part of our gift to the world? Or do they create a cultural insularity that hinders us in our mission?

If the great commission again becomes our charter, then I suspect these Mennonite “treasures” will also need to become secondary to the kingdom we are to seek first.

Our Image as Mennonites

Wonderful things have been written and said about Mennonites. I am almost inclined to say deservedly so. I love the Mennonite Church and the heritage of faith I have received. I have roots in Franconia, the oldest of the Mennonite conferences established in North America. Some scholars (such as Beulah Hostetler) have suggested that Franconia Conference embodies the essence of the Schleithem articles, that classic early Anabaptist summary of the faith, more authentically than any other conference.

But Mennonites as a whole have a reputation for wholesome family life, peace and service, concern for justice, communitarian values and

practices, a healthy critique of popular culture, and on the list could go. People seek out our church expecting an alternative expression of faith. Sometimes they are disappointed in the reality they discover among us. But many stay and find among Mennonites a fresh breath of spiritual and sociological life they wish to adopt for themselves.

We have much at stake in terms of our self-image and the image we hold among some scholars and observers of human society. Many of us carry this sense of Mennonite identity deep within us.

If we make the great commission central and address the issues identified above, one price we may pay is that our image will be tarnished. Will we remain the alternative people about which books and movies are made and who are idealized, both in our own folklore and that of others? Can we be a welcoming people no longer defined by our biological family systems and ethnic foods and still be “true” Mennonites?

Will others outside the tradition appreciate Mennonites if over time our singing comes to sound similar to that of a neighboring evangelical church, or the liturgy flows like that of a mainline congregation? Will we be held in high esteem if our Mennonite way of life changes? Is there indeed a “third way” that is also missional?

A common fear among us is that we might sell out to evangelicalism,

to popular Christianity; that we might exchange our birthright for the proverbial mess of porridge and no longer be true Mennonites. Are we ready to pay this price?

Surely there are other implications for our churches if we truly make the great commission our central emphasis. One issue not developed here relates to authority and approaches to leadership, and how these might change as professionalism molds our lives, as we no longer exhibit the humble, self-effacing qualities that in former years characterized our leaders. Might our leadership style for church planting and mission shift to a more assertive style and still be true to our Anabaptist faith?

I am confident a focus on the great commission will bring many positive results in terms of the kingdom and in the transformation of lives. We may discover ways of being Mennonite that are fresh and exciting, and our faith may become more attractive and fruitful in our world.

But there are risks we must face honestly. As Jesus said, we need to count the cost lest we begin building and later decide we can't go ahead and the house remains half-finished. Then we may be better off if we had not begun. Personally I am committed to moving ahead with this great commission emphasis; I am also aware that mission is no innocuous venture.

In the twentieth century, mission was the source of much renewal in many of our congregations and conferences. Some would say our efforts overseas were a mixed blessing, imparting both the gospel of Jesus Christ and elements of Mennonite culture (not to speak of the gospel of Western culture with its accompanying glitter).

As North American Mennonites, we managed to survive twentieth-century missionary outreach and maintain continuity with the historic faith of Mennonites. My sense is that in the twenty-first century it will be more difficult to hold

these together. Are we truly ready to be Mennonite and missional?

Maybe, just maybe, our sisters and brothers in the Southern Hemisphere who found faith through our twentieth-century missionary efforts will now be able to help us sort out our questions and to embrace a fresh missionary consciousness for the twenty-first century. In that I find hope.

—*James M. Lapp, Harleysville, Pennsylvania, is Conference Pastor, Franconia Mennonite Conference, a cluster of churches belonging to Mennonite Church USA.*

Truth

God Loves You they said
and pointed at me
adding
their own conditions.
(I thought they were God.)

Then I did
something
so they only loved me
before.
(I still thought they were God.)

Now I hear a different them
say
God Loves You
as they hold
close my differences.
I know. They are God.

—*Starla J. King*

Going Home to the City

Jessica King

I'm a home-seeker—albeit one caught between the rush and promise of newness and the beauty of belonging. After the joy of finding my way home alone to a mud-brick house in Abidjan's ghettos and the melancholic rootlessness I felt in Athens when I gave up on finding home there, I moved to Pittsburgh five years ago expecting to take the next plane out. So what happened? I feel more at home right here than I ever have.

“We’re a society of leavers,” a friend of mine sings, “caught between permanence and motion,” sings another. These Mennonite musician-muses proclaim that Mennonite society runs in the same ruts as the world. Our communities may be tighter than average, but the options are no fewer for those who look to leave home. I’m a young Mennonite and a member of an oversaturated, overmarketed, and overloaded generation whose choices outnumber our dreams.

But I’m fortunate; I happened into a community whose graciousness and continuity has some-

how offered my paltry dreams a chance to take root. And here I am—unsoiled by the lure of outward trajectory, not conflicted by competing choices. I'm quickly realizing that, in the words of another friend, journeys can be measured in depth as well as distance. I see already the promise of growth springing from those roots I've dug into the mix of concrete, clutter, and patches of green here on this little grid of streets—my neighborhood in Pittsburgh.

Not so long ago—and not so far away—in Lancaster's suburban heartland, I felt rootbound. I dreamed

of exotic locales like Abidjan and Athens and ways to leave the place that surrounded me. Now I realize that from those carved-up farmfields and multiplying cul-de-sacs I took with me a revered sense of home—a respect for rootedness and an awareness that roots come to support trunks and branches.

This is rare, I'm finding. You could get on an interstate highway in Pittsburgh and drive to the next metropolitan area and, except for signage, not even know you've arrived in a different place. So many places in this country seem like no place in particular. Suburbia, the fastest growing demographic in the U.S., according to the new census,

isn't really a place—it's more the idea of one. Cookie-cutter architecture and national retail chains make every place seem like the same place. It's the antithesis of a Mennonite philosophy (some might argue theology) that stresses a connection to a place, a community of people, and a purpose.

My husband and I, both in our mid-twenties, both typified as Gen-Xers, recently bought a house four blocks from the voluntary service house we first called home in Pittsburgh—and where I now work. Since then, I've heard that 10 minutes of commuting each day reduces social networks and connections by 10 percent. I believe it. My daily five-minute walk increases the connectedness I feel to this place and these neighbors by that same 10 percent.

I've heard that one of our biggest challenges in this new millennium is to turn geography into community. That's what's so amazing about what I'm finding in Pittsburgh. For decades, Pittsburgh's communities were geographically defined. Take the "hills" for instance: Polish Hill, The Hill District (an African-American neighborhood), Squirrel Hill (a Jewish enclave), and more.

In a similar way, a small group of young Mennos is now in the process of adopting a vision that takes turn-

ing geography into community in a new direction. We're all transplants in this neighborhood—the first place we landed here in Pittsburgh. This growing community has created a demand for a new dimension of collective work. Our vision now includes long-term commitments like the acquisition and rehabilitation of the abandoned church on the corner as an anchor and hub for community strengthening initiatives.

This endeavor pins our diverse and individual journeys to a geographically specific vision for the restoration of our neighborhood. This vision—this commitment—is like buying a farm. You see, we all come from places like Lancaster and Goshen where farms outnumber street grids and people stay in the same place for generations. A friend writes, "Farms are to be permanent. . . . you take a long-term view; your children, do not forget, will one day live off these very same fields." And I believe this trend toward a new form of rootedness lies in the very depths of our Mennonite souls.

Pittsburgh is a case study in rootedness for me—a place with a rust-belt urban history of social and economic decline. Longtime Pittsburghers are just realizing, it seems, that steel won't come back after all. It's front-page news every time the mayor proposes a new plan aimed at economic revitalization or attracting new residents.

Meanwhile cities like New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and Los Angeles are running out of room to house their young tech workers and their billion dollar start-ups. So what's so compelling about Pittsburgh for a mobile young person who could live anywhere?

If people in Pittsburgh haven't been forced out already, drawn to jobs in D.C. or the Sunbelt, you'll find their roots are incredibly deep. Their connection to this place and the people who've lived here runs back generations.

Of course, for me it doesn't hurt that there's a close-knit group of Mennonites who also call Pittsburgh home. The Mennonites I call my friends derive meaning both from the identity that comes with cultural identification as Mennonites and from the connections they've made in the fertile soil of Pittsburgh.

The sense of identity and belonging is refreshing, at least for now. It's a flat-out rejection of alienation—which is, more than anything else, the root of any so-called malaise, lack of ownership, or transient living that are neat little headings under which my generation is often categorized.

Belonging to and caring for places is something Mennonites often do well. Our farming heritage is more than land husbandry—it's also cultivation of neighbors, community, church, and the common

I've heard that one of our biggest challenges in this new millennium is to turn geography into community. That's what's so amazing about what I'm finding in Pittsburgh.

good. And despite the connectedness to land, Mennonite heritage has also taught us that stewardship is more important than ownership. Like the Israelites in Leviticus, we have heard God say, “the land is mine, and you come to it as aliens and tenants of mine” (Lev. 25:23).

Duane Friesen, the Mennonite author of *Artists, Citizens, Philosophers: Seeking the Peace of the City*, echoes this. He writes, “Christian existence is like being citizens and aliens at the same time.” In a sense, none of us is at home here. In Pittsburgh, Lancaster, anywhere.

This admission shouldn’t set us wandering, however. Our calling is to engage the places we live as the Is-

raelites did in Babylon, “seek the peace of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (Jer. 29:7).

Acknowledging that we don’t own the places we inhabit, or any place really, and that we and our neighbors are all resident aliens in God’s land can somehow humble us. It reminds us that we are to invest wherever God is; indeed, we are called to be home wherever we are, because we, our neighbors, the land, and the city all belong to God.

—*Jessica King, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, is Executive Director of Mennonite Urban Corps.*



Artist Myths and Beyond

Kara Hartzler

Quick, name five full-time artists (people who wake up and go to a studio, piano, or laptop and spend the bulk of their day producing art as a chosen vocation) who are also practicing members of a religious community. How many did you get? Could you hit double digits if you tried?

Having spent the last three years in the secular art world, I’m beginning to realize how extremely rare it is to see an artist—particularly from the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition—who has not bundled his or her artistic talent together with a “helping” profession. Our painters do art therapy, our writers teach ESL classes, our musicians direct children’s choirs, our actors do role-playing/conflict mediation work, and so on. Why are so many artists feeling it necessary to justify their work through a service application?

“Well, duh,” you say. “It’s nearly impossible to make a living as a full-time artist. Of course people will combine their interests with a paying career—it’s called health insurance.”

Certainly this is true. But if the reasons are purely economic, this would imply that the percentage of full-time artists in the religious world is equal to the percentage of full-time artists in the general population. Hmm, maybe not as true.

On a personal level, I have to confess I've spent most of my adult life juggling a love for theater with a commitment to social justice, yet I've never found a way to combine the two that didn't make one of them feel watered down.

I've spent years bopping back and forth between the two worlds—a year of voluntary service followed by a year of theater work; two years of teaching followed by three years of writing; graduating this spring with an MFA in Playwriting followed by my entry into law school this fall. Every time I temporarily leave one for the other, I question my motives. Is the social justice thing simply a byproduct of religious guilt? Is the theater thing just a selfish desire for exhibitionism? And how did growing up in a religious community skew my view of it all?

So I think it's important to periodically reexamine our attitudes toward art and figure out why we can be so apologetic and sheepish and guilty about the whole professional artist thing. After all, when I bring up that old can-I-do-art-while-the-world-is-starving issue with graduate school friends, I get a lot of

blank stares. And I can't go on indefinitely pretending it's everyone else who's out of step.

Let's look at some of the buried attitudes about artists a religious upbringing may have dropped in our psyches along the way:

Artists Are Narcissistic and Self-Absorbed

I vividly (oh, so vividly) remember telling my mother about a friend who was going to pursue a graduate degree in violin performance. My mother responded by wrinkling her nose slightly and saying, "Isn't that kind of selfish?" (In all fairness to the dear woman who bore me, she now recants this statement and supports my playwriting wholeheartedly, claiming I remember far more things than I should.)

But my mother's faux pas was probably more blunt than inaccurate in terms of representing the prevailing attitude. For Mennonites of my generation, our grandparents were farmers, our parents did 1-W (alternative service as opposed to going to war) and MCC (service with Mennonite Central Committee), and we traveled abroad as missionary kids or college students, witnessing poverty and extreme need.

Our religious culture was based upon hurricane relief, postwar service, flood mop-up, "helping out." How does an artist sitting alone in a room every day fit into this picture?

Out of 12 people in my playwriting program, I've become known as the "socially conscious" one—would this still be the case if I hadn't been raised a Mennonite?

Artists Are Morally Suspect

To have the freedom to create, it's often necessary to suspend one's morality to dig at the root of truth and human nature. This can be scary territory for religious communities—particularly when talk of sexuality, hatred, addiction, lying, and stealing isn't capped with a reassuring "Don't do that!"

Artists tell stories, and stories aren't sermons. Stories are the dark secrets, the painful moments, the wine that gets stashed in the top cupboard when relatives come over. The process of thinking about and creating these stories has "slippery slope" written all over it.

Artists Are Impractical

And how are you planning to support yourself? Nice sculpture, did you pick up the groceries? We are nothing if not a people brimming with pragmatism and fiscal responsibility.

In contrast, art by definition defies the notion of utilitarianism. Here's this guy who's getting paid little or nothing to create something with little or no use; is it any wonder he's getting odd looks on Sunday morning from the lady at the end of the pew?

Artists Are Just Plain Weird

I'll be first to admit this. Artists have messy hair, keep odd hours, and talk to themselves. They either stare at you for too long or don't make eye contact at all. They use words like "timbre" and "perception shift." When I visit relatives, there's no better way to bring dinner conversation to a screeching halt than to raise the issue of my struggles with the Act II subplot construction of my latest play. A large number of artists also tend to be introverts, which adds a whole new level of social awkwardness to the issue.

Sure, our openness and respect for the arts has come a long way in the last three or four decades. Theater is no longer evil, we can say the word "dance," and acappella is a choice. But much like racism or sexism, just because the pressure is subtle doesn't mean it's not endemic. My mother's slip that a violin performance degree was "selfish" made me wince only because it confirmed what I had always suspected—that pursuing a career as a professional artist would somehow drive a wedge between me and my community.

I've thought to myself, *Okay, so what if a few artists don't devote their full vocational energy to their creative pursuits, what would be the big loss?* Would Shakespeare not have written *Hamlet* if he was teaching at Oxford? Would Picasso not have painted *Guernica* if he was doing art therapy in Spanish prisons? Would

Mozart have ditched a few operas if he was tired from his day job?

Difficult to say, but let's turn it around—what if the composer who's also a high-school music teacher said, "Okay, this week I've got to spend 50-plus hours writing music, so any classes, rehearsals, lessons, paperwork, grading, and meetings will have to be done in my spare time after that. But don't worry, I'll still be a great teacher!"

We tend to appreciate the arts in retrospect, not remembering that a subtle hostility in our culture may right now be preventing the emergence of such future Mennonite-related artists as the next Julia Kasdorf

or Rudy Wiebe or Mary Oyer. How are the messages we inadvertently send to our young artists withering their creative potential or causing them to seek refuge in a more understanding secular world?

As long as professional artists are not fully cultivated and encouraged within our religious traditions, we're sentencing ourselves to a practical, efficient, and well-meaning cultural stagnation.

By the way, I only came up with four.

—*Kara Hartzler lives in Iowa City, Iowa, and is completing a Masters of Fine Arts in Playwriting.*



Moving into This New House

Michael A. King

It was with relief and sadness that in 1997 I wrote for *Christian Living* magazine the last of the nearly monthly "Kingsview" columns that had been appearing since 1989. Relief because I could forget that task amid starting a new publishing company, finishing a dissertation, and moving toward a new pastorate. Sadness because I had loved writing the column and felt the grief of "leaving this old house," as I put it then, and saying good-bye to the readers who had visited with me in it.

I had only a foggy idea of what lay ahead when in that final column I cited Hebrews 11, "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen," then concluded with these words: "I trust that within such developments God is gently at work, sewing stitch by stitch the walls of the new tents in which I'll for a time make camp on my way toward God's great homeland. And as they say in Mexico, one of my early homes, *Mi casa es su casa*, my house is your house. I hope you'll come visit me in my new homes."

I confess to feeling a tingle in my spine to be able now, four years later, to welcome you simultaneously into this new house, *Dream-Seeker Magazine*, as well as into that old room it, a Kingsview with at least some (I'm not very good at tracking what's up in the corners) cobwebs swept away.

And I hope you won't mind if I briefly tell how this came about. Two threads intertwine. The first goes back to the early 1990s. My life was in crisis. I sensed I needed to do much personal growing and also that it might be time to go back to school to prepare for the career possibilities I glimpsed dimly ahead.

One day within that turmoil I found myself for the first time on the West Coast and on a high Oregon bluff, looking down over wave after wave of flower-strewn meadow to the majestic swells of the Pacific Ocean. I gazed at the glory and felt the ocean wind wrap itself around me. I felt simultaneously swamped by the hurt and fear of that period and opened as fully as I've ever been to the sense that I was hearing very nearly the audible voice of God's own Holy Spirit.

As the Spirit of God did "descend upon my heart," to echo the words of a great old hymn, I heard many things that have guided me

since, but what matters here was this: God seemed to be telling me that my deepest vocational calling was to collaborate with the power of words, those same words Genesis says God used to create all that is, to weave and seek dreams, to shape visions, to bring healing and hope amid life's hurts and horrors.

That vision sustained and motivated me through the joys and the terrors of studying about the power and peril of words by pursuing a doctorate in rhetoric and communication and writing a dissertation. I would often look up from my computer, up to the wall just above my printer, to gaze at the photograph of that haunting Oregon vista. And I stood in my mind's eye on that bluff as I decided God's call included starting the publishing company through which *Dream-Seeker Magazine* is being released.

Then came the second thread. Last autumn I woke from a dream. In the dream I had been back in college and filled with images of yearning which, I came to realize, held another call. I kept pondering what it was from college days that the dream's images were inviting me to reawaken.

Eventually I realized it was this: my love of writing. For 10 years I

I felt simultaneously swamped with the hurt and fear of that period and opened as fully as I've ever been to the sense that I was hearing very nearly the audible voice of God's own Holy Spirit.

had been constantly studying words or working with them as an editor or publisher, yet they were largely the words of others, not words from my own heart. It was time for me to write again.

But how? It seemed I needed to integrate both my calling to help others find and share words from their souls and my calling to offer my own words. Then I had the wild idea to start a new magazine that would allow both to happen, and with the invaluable counsel and support of consultants and friends, it has.

As I feel myself simultaneously standing in that ocean wind high above the waves and now able to see

at least part of where God was inviting me to go, I am grateful. With joy I look forward to what comes next.

I invite you to explore with me the rooms I hope we'll together encounter in this new house. And I hope as well that we'll sometimes travel beyond the house, toward distant seas and meadows, in search of places where the wind blows strong and sweet and through it God's Spirit descends upon our hearts.

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



Contemplating the Systematic Ethics of James William McClendon Jr.

Daniel Hertzler

Systematic Theology: Ethics. By James William McClendon Jr. Abingdon Press, 1986.

As one who cut his eyeteeth on the Congregational discipline of John S. Mast and his wisdom teeth on the Mennonite writing of Guy F. Hershberger, I could not but be concerned about ethics. Indeed, it goes farther back than this. At the age of eight or nine, I was taken to the woodshed by my father for bad-mouthing my mother. In my experience behavior has been serious business.

Actually, as I read James William McClendon Jr.'s ethics, I find that what I have been concerned about is morality. He writes that "ethics and morals are related as theory and practice; thus 'ethics' is the study (or systematization) of morals. . . ." Meanwhile, he notes, "'morals' (or 'morality') means the actual conduct of people viewed with concern for

right and wrong, good and evil, virtue and vice" (p. 47).

In contrast to my interest in ethics, I have had trouble getting really stirred up by systematic theology. At Eastern Mennonite College I took the required course and kept notes on the lectures. I do not remember any specific fact from these, but of course that can be said regarding many courses I took. Systematic theologians have a tendency to begin their discussions with such topics as "prolegomena" and this sort of approach makes the eyes glaze over.

Then I found McClendon's theology, which begins with ethics instead of the other way around.

Maybe I could get into this. I also found him of interest because of his "testimony" in *Mennonite Quarterly Review* (October 2000), the first of 12 essays on how contributors' "theological or ethical understandings have been shaped by an engagement with the Anabaptist tradition."

In "The Radical Road one Baptist Took," he tells how he grew up in Louisiana among Christians who assumed that when the government called, young men should be available to defend the country. So he did his "duty" and became a part of the U.S. occupation of Japan following World War II.

After the war he became a theologian and in 1967 attended a "be-

lievers church" conference held in Louisville, Kentucky, where he met John Howard Yoder. A few years later he read Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus* "and by the time I had finished I had undergone a second conversion." Anyone who was converted by reading *The Politics of Jesus* gets my attention.

Now this reconverted Baptist was still a theologian, and it came to him that Baptists today need a theology, even if for centuries they have gotten by without this sophisticated reasoning. He observes, as I have, that theologians typically began with "prolegomena," that is "foundations."

He notes two problems with this. For one, "Many students, starting there, quit as soon as they can." For another, theologians who leave ethics to last, often do not get it written. He wonders how the story of Christianity might have been different if the church leaders at Nicaea had tried "to secure Christian social ethics before refining Christian dogma" (p. 42). A haunting question indeed.

So the first of McClendon's three volumes indeed is ethics. But it is still systematic theology and we are urged to read it slowly for, as he says, writing it was a slow process.

What then has McClendon done? Too much to comment on in

Then I found McClendon's theology, which begins with ethics instead of the other way around. Maybe I could get into this.

detail, but this much I see as important: with the help of John Howard Yoder and others he challenges what some have labeled the “myth of redemptive violence,” the assumption that Christians must at times do evil—such as fight in war—to avoid worse things happening.

Then he goes on to segment the ethical life, to discuss it in terms of three separate spheres: body ethics, social ethics, and resurrection ethics. Each of these gets three chapters, an introduction, a biographical example, and further discussion. Finally, in the last chapter he defends what he terms “narrative ethics.” Every ethical theory has a story in back of it, he says. Some are not willing to acknowledge this.

McClendon discusses at length the point that none of these three spheres of ethics is adequate alone. As he observes, “The moral life is not complete except in the union of its several strands.” Yet for discussion purposes he segments them.

It is of interest to observe the persons chosen as biographical examples of ethical integrity. For body ethics McClendon presents Sarah and Jonathan Edwards. Jonathan is famous for a hellfire sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” but McClendon points out there was more to him than this. Sarah and Jonathan were a romantic couple, he reports, who conceived 11 children, six of whom were born on Sunday.

The follow-up chapter seeks to develop “an ethic of sexual love.” In summarizing this discussion, McClendon asserts that love is a feeling, it is a virtue, it is a gift. “As a gift it returns to the giver; God is love, and to the extent that we abide in love . . . we abide in God, and he in us” (p. 155). It is hard to see how to argue with this summary of Christian love.

Next McClendon discusses social ethics and stresses that this strand cannot stand alone, particularly because there is a danger that a socially virtuous community may become smug and vain. The biography for this sphere is of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German theologian executed because of involvement in a plot to get rid of Hitler.

This is one of the more definitive discussions I have seen of “the tragedy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.” His death and the tragedy of his life, says McClendon, “was but an element in the greater tragedy of the Christian community in Germany. . . . They had no effective moral structure in the church. . . . No structures, no practices, no skills of political life existed that were capable of resisting, of Christianly resisting, the totalitarianism of the times” (p. 207).

The next chapter seeks to stress and illustrate the importance of connecting body ethics and social ethics. This happens through “establishing and maintaining Chris-

tian community with its symbolic meal” (p. 239).

In the third section of the book, McClendon considers resurrection ethics because “these two strands [those of body and community] yearn for a third, that they do not by themselves or even added together, constitute true Christian morality” (p. 243). What transforms them, he says, is faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The example in this part of the book is Dorothy Day, who was converted after a somewhat dissolute life and baptized into the Catholic Church. She would found *The Catholic Worker*, a radical newspaper which preached the gospel of peace when this was not a Catholic doctrine. She did enough radical things to have J. Edgar Hoover label her as “erratic.”

The commentary chapter that follows, “A Future for Peace?” is a wide-ranging discussion of the Bible, church history, and present Christian perspectives. McClendon finds that, as of old, many “have set out on militant crusades to save God’s world from others’ wickedness.” He perceives that a better strategy is “to let our actions for peace be altogether the practices of peace, and to take heart from the risen Christ still with us” (p. 326).

Is it necessary to write 326 pages to make this point? There are those who have focused the issues of Christian ethics with fewer words.

For example, the late John E. Lapp observed that when his wife as a young person was instructed in church membership, the course was simply the Sermon on the Mount. “It must have been effective,” he said. “She is a better Christian than I am.”

Lynn Miller once put the Mennonite perspective on ethics in a single sentence. He said, “Mennonites believe that Jesus meant what he said and that it applies to us.”

Bill Dezort, a member of my own congregation, was in a Sunday school class visited by a person seeking to “study” Mennonites. Bill observed, “Mennonites believe you should be the same on Monday as on Sunday.” These are good points of reference, but they are only what one might call the tip of the iceberg. McClendon’s systematic ethics come from deep in the iceberg.

I reflect on the fact that the Old Order Amish do little theological writing yet appear to prevail as a Christian community. But then I recall that those of us who are Mennonites have taken risks which the Old Order Amish to this point have avoided. We live on the uneasy edge between a community of faith in Jesus and one which considers Jesus irrelevant. Some in that community are fellow Christians who seem quite capable of straining at gnats and swallowing camels.

In contemplating McClendon’s ethics I come back to his confession

which I quoted at the beginning. McClendon has been there, done that, and concluded there is no real Christian life in it. Anyone tempted by variations on Jesus' three classic temptations does well to listen to people like McClendon who have found a home in the Anabaptist vision after wandering in a theological wilderness.

Support for the way of Jesus turns up in interesting places. A Jewish scholar, David Flusser, has written a book entitled *Jesus* and dedicated the revised edition "to my Mennonite friends." After all that has been done to Jews in the name of Christ, I find it of interest that a scholar such as Flusser has studied Jesus. But then I find that he grew up in an area where his Christian neighbors were friendly.

On page 102 he writes of Jesus that "being in Jerusalem he saw the imminent catastrophe as almost inevitable (Luke 19:40-44). The future destruction of Jerusalem could have been avoided, if it had chosen the way of peace and repentance." I

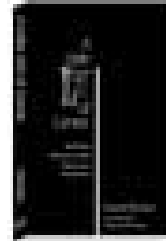
would have hesitated to say this, but Flusser has said it.

Twice within the century after the death of Jesus, Jerusalem was destroyed for rebelling against the Romans. We cannot stand by in judgment. But we can remind ourselves that if we preached only that Christ died for our sins we preached a truncated gospel. It is necessary also to give attention to what Jesus said and as McClendon concludes, "to take heart from the risen Christ still with us" (p. 326).

And what about McClendon's other two volumes? Will I read them? Not tomorrow. Not the next day. But maybe later.

—*Daniel Hertzler, Scottsdale, Pennsylvania, is author of a memoir, A Little Left of Center (Dream-Seeker Books, 2000) and instructor for Pastoral Studies Distance Education. He also walks the dog, cuts wood in season, works in the garden, and keeps a few bees. He and wife Mary have four sons and nine grandchildren.*





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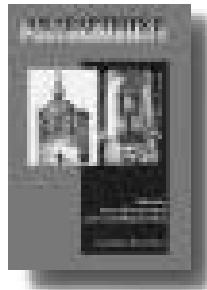


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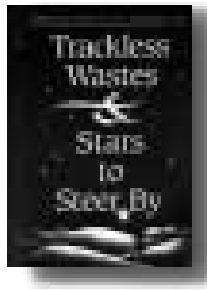


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What's moving on the hills could be mist or rain
the first long notes of the apocalypse

or just another load of thick summer dreams.
What's coming won't be hurried or put off.

Yes the stars are there, blazing, and all
the dark matter too. A woman with son and daughter

settles in beneath a bridge, smooths cardboard
with a dirty hand. A man pours beer and brags

of the tank he drove into the desert. Two million bucks.
So much easier to blow things up than get them right,

a marriage, a country, a small town forty miles
from the nearest beer. It isn't just this poem

that's loose, gliding from scenery to disaster,
floating through the gorgeous, deadly world.

It's not just me. Say what you will about the dark—
it won't leave you contented, or alone. It saunters

at its own pace down the long bluff, up the streets
of the finest little town in Arkansas. I'm trying

to remember where the keys are, which road I'll take
out of town. Remembering a voice: I'm tired, yes.

The boys are fine. Call Tuesday. Bring yourself home.

—Jeff Gundy

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