

DreamSeeker Magazine

Voices from the Soul



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Winter 2009

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Editorial: Exploring the Mansion

As 2008 wore on, it became ever clearer that profound changes were underway. A culture of debt and consumption was crashing. In the midst of it all a family danced in Kenya as news came that one of their own would lead America.

Now we wait to see what 2009 brings. There is reason for fear. And hope. Who can say what next? But I find myself viewing it all through the prism of Henry's house, as reported on by Noël King. Henry thought he was living in an efficiency. But it was a mansion. What if that is what is happening to our country and world? What if the walls of our efficiency are coming down—and showing us the rooms of a mansion?

That is also the image that has guided my arranging of this issue of *DreamSeeker Magazine*—the house is bigger than we thought. Then what is in its rooms? After King invites us to search, Alan Soffin helps us find the spirit for the quest: one of respect and love for what is there. Ken Beidler shows us that in some rooms are things that stump us yet can be embraced. Von Riege invites us into her mother's Alzheimer's and what she seeks in that part of the house she calls "God's waiting room."

Amid his journey through clinical depression, Andrew Moore unlocks rooms in the house of his soul he has so long kept shut. Jeremy Frey seeks to enter the mansion by walking through doors opened by his grand-

parents' lives. Brenda Hartman-Souder learns to walk through the room of rituals in her old American life to those of a Nigerian house. As she wrestles with how to repair her actual house, Renee Gehman hints at issues in her psyche's house.

David Greiser shows us a Bill Maher who pokes irreverent holes in religions whose rooms he thinks too small. As Greiser suggests, Maher's own room may be too small, but anyone journeying with him who has eyes to see may be helped to glimpse the mansion.

Daniel Hertzler ponders how often Christians and Jews have locked each other and themselves into small houses. Can they find what Alain Epp Weaver, whom Hertzler reviews, calls "Breaches in the Walls"? Meanwhile the poets in their ways seek mansions.

Finally I report on the mixed pain and joy of watching my daughter fly from Denver not back to my house, now too small for her, but to her own, where she too seeks her mansion.

Now we wait for 2009 to unfold. We wait for Barack Obama to show where he will lead us. We wait for our economy to tear down walls and usher us into a mansion beyond ways of living grown too small. We wait, there in our one-room apartment of unfettered capitalism and pursuit of forms of treasure not laid up in heaven, to enter a place better than the one whose walls are debt and too much stuff. —Michael A. King

What if the walls of our efficiency are coming down—and showing us the rooms of a mansion?

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Henry's House

Noël R. King

Henry Toyles found out one day that there were more rooms to his house than he had ever believed or known.

“I had no idea I lived in a mansion!” he exclaimed shortly thereafter as he circled around his estate on foot. “This is totally unbelievable!”

“What I find unbelievable is that he only now just sees this,” his neighbor muttered as he watched Henry skirt the grounds. “Where has he been all his life?”

“What? What was that you said?” called Henry, whose ears seemed to be unbelievably keen this day. He had no idea he could hear so far—or see so clearly, for that matter. Was that really a distant mountain over the rise of his hill? How had he never seen THAT before? Where in the world had he been?

“Unbelievable!” his neighbor called back.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Henry shouted.

“Tell you what, that you’re alive?” muttered the neighbor, now very softly. Out loud, he yelled back, “Tell you what?”

“That I’m alive!” Henry leaped and did a little jig. “And that I have a huge big HOUSE to live in, not just that little one-room efficiency I thought I lived in!”

“I don’t know, man, this is getting a little too weird

for me,” muttered the neighbor, now so softly as to be barely audible even to himself.

“I think I’ll go in and get me some lunch!” he yelled aloud, cranking up the volume. “Do you want some?”

“No!” cried Henry. “I have my own KITCHEN now! I am going to get my own self some lunch! Hooray! Hooray! And then I am going to go sit in my LIVING ROOM. My LIVING ROOM! Did you ever hear the likes of that before? I have a LIVING ROOM!”

Feeling more than a little over-exuberated by Henry’s outbursts of joy and discovery, his neighbor snuck back into his own house and closed the kitchen curtains for a while, to shut out too much new life from slid-

ing in as it rang out from across the way.

I may just have to move, he thought as he ate his pastrami sandwich standing up by the kitchen counter. *This exuberance is killing me!*

“This is my house,” he declared, “and I am gonna live in it.”

Meanwhile, across the way, Henry was already arranging a party for one and all, up and down his street, along with long-lost relatives and friends from out of town, to give himself a proper housewarming party.

“This is my house,” he declared, “and I am gonna live in it.”

And that he did.

—As circumstances warrant, through her Turquoise Pen column Noël R. King, Scottsville, Virginia, reports on strange and wonderful things, including Henry’s house.



Epiphany and the Silver Screen

Alan Soffin

In the 1940 motion picture production of Thornton Wilder’s “Our Town,” the opening credits roll, shakily, over the black and white image of a low hill topped by a split-rail fence. The figure of a man appears, climbing slowly into view from behind the hill, the scene bathed in the softness of early light. The fence runs along both sides of a country lane. The man draws the upper rail off out of its post and steps over the lower one. He turns and replaces the rail. He makes his way toward a small wooden bridge.

The scene is suspended in the music of Aaron Copeland, gently singing of the simple, the rural, the eternal. Entering onto the bridge the man stops. He notices something about the fence. Stooping down he picks up a rock. He pounds a nail that has come loose into the rail, fixing it once more securely to the post. He is alone. It is the time before the town will awake. He passes on and, following a sharp bend in the path he walks toward us where he will stop, lean on the fence, and tell us about the town of Grover’s Corners.

In the simplicity, not merely of the scene but of the one practical gesture in which a small repair is made, is all one needs to find religion. So much is given in so lit-

tle, which is, after all, not unlike the story of our miniscule race.

The man we watch—Thornton’s “stage manager”—is quite alone. No one sees what he does. He is not under orders. The bridge is in no danger. The fence does not hang perilously down. What stops him at the bridge is that some work has come undone. The rough-hewn wood, still speaking of the tree from which it came, has been shaped into a thing of protection, demarcation, and reassurance. It is easy and safe to ford the stream beneath the bridge. Nature and mind have come together in a manner that lets each facet of the world retain the feeling of its origin.

The man picks up a rock, not a hammer. The ringing of the stone on iron is a reprise of the union between humankind and nature that first made the rough-cut path and bridge. The man strikes the nail until it is seated. He does not toss the rock away. He sets it down.

The way it ought to be is now the way it is. The sky, alone, has seen his work. Those who later walk the path

will have no knowledge of his act. He profiteth not. His simple gesture is a gesture of respect, all the greater for its unimportance, all the deeper for its simplicity, all the more loving for its closeness to nature.

His simple gesture is a gesture of respect, all the greater for its unimportance. . . .

And the motion picture that follows—a religious wonder, like the folk-carved statues of saints—is all the more profound for its humble truth. As a sophisticate, I might smile in condescension at the small-town idyll of its surface, but if the smile does not in time vanish from my face, then I am truly lost. All this melts away in later iterations of this film—this Platonic “idea” of mortality, travail, and decency set not in “town” but in life on earth.

—Alan Soffin, *Doylestown, Pennsylvania, numbers among his interests philosophy, religion, filmmaking, writing, and music ranging from classical through jazz and international sounds. Although an atheist, Soffin seeks nevertheless to value religion and is completing Rethinking Religion, a book on the topic for Cascadia Publishing House.*



Stumpers

Ken Beidler

I am staying home during the day with our two children while my wife teaches at a local university. By the time she arrives shortly after five, my spirit lags. Recently, after greeting her, I tell her that she has to answer all the rest of our son’s questions for the remainder of that day.

At three, the irrepressible query was “Why?” Now there is a greater complexity of inquiry, both in the question and the range of subjects addressed. Sometimes he turns philosophical. This morning he asked me how many ladders it would take to climb to heaven.

Typically the subjects are more earthly. Right now with the change in fall weather, I field a lot of questions about trees and leaves. I wish I had paid better attention in my high school earth science class. When I am dogged by question after question of the earth science variety, I long for next year when his kindergarten teachers will have the job of satiating his appetite for knowledge. I just hope he remembers to raise his hand and take his turn.

Several years ago, I went on a sabbatical from my work as a pastor. I spent four days with the community of Benedictines at St. John’s Abbey in Collegeville,

Minnesota. I joined their religious community for prayer three times a day, a prominent part of which was the singing of the psalms. I was struck with the honesty of this ancient book of prayer and with the frequency with which the writers of the psalms ask searching questions.

In our corporate worship we tend to focus on psalms of praise, but a closer look reveals that the psalmist is as likely to utter a plea of help to God in the form of a question as to burst out in unfettered praise. Psalm 13 is a good example. The first two verses contain five questions, beginning with the poignantly existential, “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?”

In a week, the monastic community will read through the entire litany of these human and spiritual questions laying them before God. When faced with yet another question from my son, I try to remember that this questioning nature is a part of the spiritual and existential DNA God has woven into our being.

In my effort to understand the relevancy of this spiritual curiosity, I have started to develop categories for my child’s questions. There are the searching and unanswerable variety with a turn toward heavenly things of the “ladders to heaven” kind. There are the transparently self-interested questions. These concern life or death matters like when will he be allowed to watch another video and when will he be able to have more ice cream.

As we waited at a traffic light on a bridge, my son asked me, “What if the bridge fell in the water?” . . . Well, there is the stumper isn’t it!

A particular favorite right now is the “What if” question. The other day we were crossing a bridge across the Schuylkill River here in Philadelphia where we live. Ever since the tragic bridge accident in Minneapolis our son has been aware of the perils of crossing bridges. As we waited at a traffic light on a bridge, my son asked me, “What if the bridge fell in the water?” I have learned to try to cut off this line of questioning right away.

My best strategy is to begin with a sweeping and confident statement that that this will not happen. “Don’t worry, the bridge will not fall down.”

But usually he will press ahead on the conversational path he has chosen and say, “But what if our car fell in?”

I realize that I am committed at this point. “Well, the car would start to sink, but I would get both you and Ezra out. Papi is a very good swimmer.” I, of course, doubt my ability to perform this superhuman act but it seems prudent to try to bring this progression of questions to a swift close.

To which he replies, “But what if you couldn’t get us out?”

Well, there is the stumper isn’t it! It is the question with a hundred or more variations. It is the question posed by natural disasters, AIDS patients, the unfortunate victims of stray bullets and drunken drivers. My inclination is to protect my young son from the sometimes troubling end to which these “What if . . .” questions inexorably lead.

Yet the truth is that we inhabit a troubling mystery in relation to the suffering in our world. Even a four-year-old is already becoming attuned to this mystery.

Listen to the Psalmist continue in her line of questioning: “How long will you hide your face from me?

“How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?” (Ps. 13:1-2)

While it seems reasonable to me that we shield our children from some awareness of the sufferings and evils of this world, their own questions lead us there. I instinctively turn the radio off when there is a story with explicit details related to a crime particularly involving children.

I do not always have the option to practice parental censorship. Recently as we followed a bus down the street, my son pointed out the picture on the back of a bus. In an effort to end violent deaths, city officials are attempting to raise awareness about the danger of guns. In the public ad, there is an oversize gun ominously pointed in the direction of a young girl.

How might we as parents welcome and not suppress this mysterious real-

ity of suffering from our children’s awareness *and* help them live in trust and hope?

The Psalmists’ honesty and pathos remind us that these moments of human questioning in the face of our suffering belong in the spiritual life.

This sad and complicated earthly city is our dwelling place even as we long for the heavenly city where. . . .

“God will be with them;

“And will wipe every tear from their eyes.

“Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away” (Rev. 21: 3-4).

We might take a cue from the singing monks who daily construct a ladder to heaven with their prayers, not skipping any of the rungs to get there but stepping resolutely on each. Whether that rung be lament, self-pitying cry, protest at God’s abandonment, a plea for understanding or praise.

We trust that all of it, cried out in our childlike stutterings, will arrive on heaven’s doorstep as an acceptable song.

—Ken Beidler, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, is a Mennonite pastor, freelance writer, and stay-at-home dad.



God's Waiting Room

Von Riege

There was no way I could possibly recall my mom's favorite classic well enough to play a segment for this Sunday's worship . . . or could I? I had wanted to do something special to honor my parents' legacy. What better occasion than Father's Day?

I tried to get my hands to cooperate, and create a melody I needed to hear—even while tears blanked out the notes on the music score. The harder I tried to stop them, the more tears flowed.

My mind went back to days of my teen years, when our whole family was home on a Sunday afternoon. Quite often, Dad would suddenly ask Mother if she felt like playing something on the piano. She would shyly just slip onto the piano bench and begin playing some of his favorite renditions. Sitting at the desk nearby, watching her hands back then, I was totally awed at the speed her fingers could hit those keys. An excellent reader of musical scores, she delighted in adding her own flair that literally spilled forth from her heart.

Now again, I returned to the keyboard. Placing my hands back on the black and white keys, I plunged ahead in reading the score of Hungarian Rhapsody

No. 2 by Franz Liszt. I kept going even though multiple simple notes were missed. I sensed an anger building inside me toward my inability to accomplish what I had set out to do.

Unbelievably crestfallen, my limp arms fell into my lap. I would have to wait awhile longer—then I would simply try again.

Walking outside to relax, the stark reality of where I had been lately began to impact my heart more clearly. I replayed the happenings of the past several months. Many events had nearly devastated my entire world. The beauty of hearing Mother play the piano had suddenly changed, now viewed with discord and disconnected interludes.

It all began when we had to move mother into a facility that could better meet her care needs. Dad could no longer keep track of her as she wandered off numerous times and could not find her way back home.

She adjusted well to her new surroundings at the health care center. She really graced the atmosphere there with her ability to sit at the piano and have perfect recall of some of her favorite hymns. She enjoyed having this “one connection” to the past.

Eventually my heart was also ready to accept the “new normal.” We had done the right thing, and the timing was right as well. The interludes intermittently began to seem more harmonious.

Returning to my keyboard several weeks later, I was still trying to find

the right chord that would allow my heart to express real joy through a rendition once again. It was difficult to imagine that something so near and dear could now be viewed from a distance as if some frightening task. Creating a melody seemed impossible.

It all began when we had to move mother into a facility that could better meet her care needs.

As a pastor, I am often involved in funeral services and dealing with grieving families. Thus, when my dad had been found lifeless, obviously dying in his sleep a few

months ago, I thought I could handle the finality of it in resolute manner. I had written Dad a letter to be shared at his memorial service. It allowed me to express my heart, and things seemed to be going along quite well. Mother was observed to be taking these changes of life in stride, which was a much-needed relief for me.

Adding to the complexities of my world, however, I dug my heels in and pushed onward. I nearly single-handedly sorted out all of my parents' belongings from that little apartment which they both had shared earlier. The apartment was empty except for one larger item.

The last piece of furniture out the door was the piano.

Suddenly today, I reflected again on the sequence of events in my life. I am better able to see why the piano is something I have stayed away from. It has very little to do with my not wanting to follow in my mother's footsteps as an accomplished pianist. It has nothing at all to do with my lack of

ability to perform with impeccable technique. But, it has everything to do with my heart not being ready to bring forth a “true melody” from deep within.

Dust silently lingers on the old piano keys while my heart remains in “God’s Waiting Room.” Renewed faith, hope, and joy must still be locked inside the cobwebs that encase my aching heart. Once released, the *real* melody will come forth—instead

of one I have been desperately trying to create.

—*Von Riege, Wakarusa, Indiana, has pastored for the Church of the Brethren for 11 years and, has seen many life changes, among them sending an oldest son off to college. Her recent writings have included articles concerning families dealing with Alzheimer-related issues.*

A Nose for the Surface

She shows me little hills
 Moles made in her flower beds.
 How precise, how plausible the work
 These underground architects undertake—
 They have a nose for where the surface lies.
 Jesus, turning aside death,
 Moving, tunneling
 Three days under death’s surveillance.
 Parting Sheol’s dirt and stones
 Rising in an Easter gardeners’
 Smudged garb.
 Like Thomas, the sainted doubter,
 She bends over scarred ground
 Scanning for hints of new life
 Among torn up roots
 In earthen tombs.

—*Ken Beidler*

Love As My Strength

A Journal Entry

Andrew Moore

Three years ago I was diagnosed with clinical depression—but I had been suffering from depression long before then. I was a junior in college when I was diagnosed, and my life finally started to make some sense; just knowing what was wrong instead of not understanding why I felt the way I did was such a relief.

Looking back, I think my symptoms started when I was a sophomore in high school, when I couldn’t handle the guilt of not being perfect or being everything for everyone. I wanted to be Superman for them and thought I could be. Trying to do this put me in a tremendously drained physical and emotional state. I didn’t realize that then; I thought it was good to focus on other people’s problems and be there for them—but to hide myself so I wouldn’t be a burden to others.

This summer I took a trip to Ecuador, to study some Spanish and travel around getting to know the world and myself. Along the way I continued to e-mail back and forth with my counselor (who has pretty much saved my life). I kept coming back to the fact that I didn’t know how to connect to this world and how to understand spirituality. She encouraged and forced me to keep looking at myself and question what I knew and what was constant.

Through working at this, I discovered that love has been the one constant in my life. With her questions in mind, I wrote what has become this article in my journal. While writing I realized I could not do my living on my own. I need my family, community, and spirituality to survive and thrive. I need my story to be part of my life with them and the larger world, not hidden. So here goes.

I don't want to stop the pain and feelings; I'm tired of shutting down. I do it so often. How do I keep myself from doing it? I know how to turn myself off and make myself dead to the world, feeling neither pain nor happiness; now I need to figure out how to stop it. I'm hoping that takes me one step closer to understanding how I work and who I would be if I could keep from shutting down. But how does one discipline oneself to allow hurt to run its course, when that is perceived to be the necessary and good step to take?

For the first time in a long time I find myself wanting to fight the deadness. I remember trying to find the nothingness, wanting it, needing it. Anything to escape the way I felt—I wanted to feel dead so I wouldn't have to go any farther than just feeling dead.

But now I want to fight. To fight to feel. To live. Does this mean I am generally happy or have finally seen the light at the end of the tunnel? That I can handle, even enjoy, the sadness

of being alone, missing my family, girlfriend, friends? Does this mean I can manage not understanding myself?

I remember not being able to handle the pain anymore and wanting an out, any kind of out. Although I could never bring myself to committing suicide, it was not so long ago that death was a real option for me. But the love of others for me has always been too strong to let me go all the way. The love of my parents, family, friends, and even my dog Simon. Love is the answer for me. Relationships are what have kept me alive.

If love is my greatness strength, what is my greatness weakness? Since love is such an emotional, physical, and mental bond, is being dead and feeling nothing my weakness? To not be able to feel has been my biggest problem. Trying to handle the suffering of anyone or anything is so hard for me that sometimes it seems the only way answer is to turn all emotions off. But I can't—if I'm ever going to understand, I need to *feel*.

So how do I keep feeling? How do I hang on to my emotions? Do I allow or force myself to indulge in my sadness and cry or ache in my heart? My heart aches for people so much and so often that it is so hard not to turn off the pain. But the pain is good and necessary. You need to feel the pain so you can come back from it and appreciate your happiness when it comes.

But just feeling pain isn't enough. Where do I go with it? It means too little if I keep it to myself or am not ac-

tive with it in some way. I need to do something with it: be it researching poverty in Ecuador, doing what I can to help get kids off the street corners where they sell gum all day and into schools; donating money; helping with a brilliant "one laptop per child" program; or even showing this article to people so that someone who may feel as I have might find in this a bit of hope.

Back to love. The only thing I come close to understanding is love . . . all kinds of love:

- my girlfriend—a happy present and future love;
- my dog—a playful childhood-and-fun love;
- my parents and grandparents—an appreciative, grateful, and respectful love;
- traveling—an excitement love;
- siblings—an is-and-always-will-be-type of love;

- friends—an equal-enjoyment-in-every way love;
- myself—the most difficult love, but a love marked by respect and understanding;
- God—an all-these-things-and-more Love.

I am sharing this journal writing with people out of curiosity; what reactions will it bring about? In me? In others? I hope it will provoke different thoughts and emotions in me. I also hope it may comfort those who feel alone or like I do. There is so much I don't know or understand. But I hope this journal will take me in new directions and toward fresh understandings.

With love, Andrew Moore.

—Andrew Moore, Harrisonburg, Virginia, works at Rosetta Stone's Institutional Technical Support, which is sending him to India to learn how to train other tech workers.



Sentences

Jeremy Frey

Mennonites take seriously the thought that to love others, one must die to one's self.

During my college years, before I started writing and just before the strokes took his tongue, my Grandpa Metz summed up his life of mentorship to me in one complex sentence: *Whatever you decide to do with your life, make sure it serves people.*

I lightheartedly understand my grandfather's guidance, now over a decade past, as a sort-of Jesus-confronted-by-the-Pharisees moment: Jesus' summing up of Torah in one compound sentence. Jesus' summation a response to the question of what the most important command is, that trap set by the suspicious guardians of sacred text, the treasured Ten Commandments, ten rules for the road brought down from a mountain in a tortured place.

Atop the mountain Moses and Yahweh had met in secret under lightning and behind burning bushes, while the followers fleeing slavery at the base of the mountain made a sculpture of precious metals, Moses descended the meeting on the mountain and found his people creating for themselves slavery anew in the shape of a calf, Moses enraged as a bull threw down the rules for the road at their feet, went back up the mountain in search of another copy.

Then Jesus as new Moses is confronted by limited Pharisee minds, their little ideas confronting a larger one, the bully of the past path standing in the way, his compound sentence a turning of the cheek in another direction, encapsulating the ten into one new take—*love your God with all your heart and mind and soul, and love your neighbor as yourself*—his answer a glance in another direction, a kiss, a blow, a sentence to death.

I find myself sentenced to die, for life.

A couple years after I received my Grandpa Metz's instruction, my Gramma Frey died. I approached her open coffin and stood there for about a half-minute of discomfort; my mid-college youth in the face of her old-age death. Her summation of her life of mentorship to me was then spoken in the silence between us at the mouth of her coffin; a whispering, a secret meeting of mind, though I knew not then I had a mind like hers. *Live well.*

How troubling, on both accounts. Both grandparents believers: Grandpa Metz, patriarch of my mom's side of the family, a conservative minister to a single congregation for over forty years, his directive "Whatever you do with your life, make sure it serves people," and Gramma Frey, matriarch of my dad's side, a liberated harmonica-doodler and grandchildren-racer in desert, her discernment to "Live

well." Both statements, in their own rights, difficult to achieve.

And a possible paradox of instruction, from my perspective: where his life tended toward the ascetic, hers leaned toward the hedonistic. Both grandparents gave great amounts of themselves to the world, and yet, in some ways, lived at times as self-centered as many of us. Both were followers of Menno Simons, himself a follower of Christ of Torah of Moses of burning clouds by night, of intuition, a fire in the mind by day.

Regardless of what I believe from moment to moment about who or what God is, regardless of my playfulness, of my limited knowledge, of my secret meetings barefoot on mountains, of my Pharisee-like desire for old answers and my divine indwelling of new questions, I find myself sentenced to die, for life.

—Jeremy Frey, Tucson, Arizona, has published in numerous journals and anthologies. In 2006 he completed an MFA, focusing on poetry and creative nonfiction, at the University of Arizona, where he now teaches Rhetoric and Composition. He also has rediscovered acting in films and has uncovered a knack for editing memoir and poetry manuscripts. For more of his work, check out www.burntpossum.com.



Down the Lane

Revising a Ritual, Nigerian Style

Brenda Hartman-Souder

When Greg was a newborn, we regularly snuggled him into the baby sling and strolled down the Fellows Avenue sidewalk to soothe him to sleep. Three-year-old Valerie skipped along. New to the neighborhood in Syracuse, New York, we began to make acquaintances of our neighbors that through the years developed into friendships.

Eventually our jaunts around the block became a daily, after-supper ritual, when weather permitted. We'd stop to chat with our porch-sitting neighbors. Sometimes we detoured to swing in someone's back yard. We slowed down to examine ants scurrying over a dropped Popsicle and to admire newly planted flower beds.

Now that we live in Nigeria, West Africa, to serve with Mennonite Central Committee as personnel and program coordinators, we no longer have our city block to traipse around. But we have the lane that winds through the compound where we live.

Nigeria lies near the equator; dark comes by six-thirty. So here, after an early supper, while dusk starts to thicken and the yellow ball of sun makes a hasty descent, we start out. Our compound is an about 15-acre plot of land bounded by eight feet high red brick walls.

Shards of thief-deterring green Fanta bottles are cemented along the wall's top ridge. The compound holds offices, homes, and guest quarters for several nonprofit organizations as well as plenty of open space. A friend aptly called it a walled neighborhood.

The kids' flip-flops snap snap as we chat about the day and greet Nigerian neighbors coming home from work or going out to evening meetings. The burnt orange dirt road winds by tin-roofed, concrete block homes painted in shades of blue, cream, rust, and yellow. Round aluminum pots of yams, rice or cornmeal simmer over cooking fires attended by young girls or women.

Youngsters bend over buckets of soapy water scrubbing clothes and hanging them on nearby lines. Goats bleat and pull on their tethers. Children race and deftly maneuver a battered soccer ball, catching last minutes of play before dark. They shout and laugh across the dusty, empty fields that wait to be planted in ridges of yam and potatoes when the rains come. Chickens strut and peck across the path in front of us.

We walk the quarter mile or so to the main gate and the guards who staff it. Guards are not unusual here; in many settings they are a necessity. At this large compound, guards are at the entrance gate around the clock, to monitor who comes and goes, while at night six individual guards spread out to various posts.

What matters at the end of the day . . . is not so much what missionaries or development workers do, but simply that they came. . . .

Baba David is our night guard. He'll turn on the outside security lights around our home and build a fire to provide warmth. He'll trudge around the house at regular intervals all night long, swinging his flashlight in an arc, doing his best to ensure our safety. He has no weapon but a whistle which he'll use to alert us if anything is awry.

The gate guards hail us a hearty greeting and always ask Greg and Val how they are doing. They do it in Hausa and try to teach the kids the appropriate responses to their greeting. We laugh at our energetic, but mistake-filled attempts to speak as rapidly as they. We try to learn a new word or two, ask about the welfare of their families, and then, resorting to English, find them astute sources of news and politics.

As the sun dips below the brick wall, we know in minutes it will be dark. So we take our leave.

"Until tomorrow," we say.

"May God bring us to the morning," the guards reply.

"Amen."

We turn back down the lane, meeting and greeting different neighbors, until we reach the other end, where baths and bed awaits us.

Our pastor friend Obed, who lived seven years in the United States, said that when someone chooses to live in another culture and country, coming to participate in God's work, what matters at the end of the day, what lo-

cal folks remember, is not so much what missionaries or development workers do, but simply that they came, that they left what was familiar to serve and live and learn among what is not familiar. My Western activity-oriented mind both rebels at and is comforted by this comment.

We've come to Nigeria and we're walking the lane almost every night and we are making a new life here. We long for our Fellows Avenue neighbors and friends, but the broad grins and greetings of our new ones help and give us hope that we are developing a sense of belonging here too.

And each night as we turn the last little bend, the outline of our tin roofed house, with brick-red walls, forms a dark, solid outline against the deepening sky. Warmth still emanating from the sun baked walls and sidewalks welcomes us.

And now, finally, this is the place we are starting to call *home*.

—*Brenda Hartman-Souder, Jos, Nigeria, serves as co-representative of Mennonite Central Committee Nigeria and, along with spouse Mark, as parent of Valerie and Greg.*



On Taking Communion in Nigeria and Longing for Home

My daughter leaned into me as
we shared the tattered Hymns of Our Faith.
She heartily sang “Just As I am Without One Plea,”
all seven verses of it.

My daughter watched
(like the scrawny, barefoot children on the street
who follow my every move and hold out empty bowls)
the cubes of white bread then the plastic shots of juice
pass her by.

She'd been briefed; by parents who'd been informed—
only adult believers may join the communion feast here.

She watched me swallow,
hunger in her eyes and whispered
“Was it good?”

Did I somehow misunderstand
“Let the little children come to me?”

“The bread was soft and chewy,
but the ‘wine’ tasted like cough syrup,”
I whispered back.

At church back home
children join this holy sacrament.
All are welcome—
you come as you are, age 5 or 95,
to the table.

I remember how she'd carefully cup
the bit of bread, chew the morsel
then hold as precious the silver goblet and
solemnly drink the dash of juice,
not fully understanding
(and here I confess, neither do I)
yet pleased to partake
in the sacred ritual of remembrance.

I miss the communal clink
of a hundred and fifty chalices
settling securely into round holders
on the back of each dark,
scarred wooden pew.

On the way home we chewed sweet boiled peanuts,
sold by the Muslim girls who wait outside the church walls,
and fed the shells to the wind.

—*Brenda Hartman-Souder*

How Creative Home Maintenance Improved My Life

Renee Gehman

I did something last week that may indicate obsessive-compulsive tendencies, but go ahead and label me, stereotype me, spread rumors about my “condition”—I won’t care a whit. Because I have solved the problem of The Creaky Bathroom Floor, and the quality of my life has been instantaneously improved.

One’s own bathroom is not a place one can avoid; I will risk making the assumption that this is common knowledge and leave it at that. In recent months though, the floor of my bathroom has assumed an undesirable trait in the form of a loud, high-pitched creak. What was once a location of pleasant neutrality has become for me a destination of such dread that I have found myself avoiding it whenever possible.

Even so, for convenience’s sake I have daily resigned myself to endure the offensiveness of the Creaky Bathroom Floor. I have tried to acknowledge the bright side, which is that I have tended to get ready more efficiently since the coming of the Creak. But I have also been keenly aware of having consistently departed the bathroom in a bad mood.

Everything came to a head during a spontaneous nighttime bathroom-cleaning last week. As I moved back and forth along the floor, wiping the counter with Windex, the Creak reached new extremes of unbearableness. With each shift of weight the counter grew more clean and beautiful, and typically in the washing of the counter I myself am washed over with a sense of peace that even the scent of ammonia cannot abate. But now in place of serenity, frustration festered and ultimately brought me to the point where I was compelled to inwardly declare, *This is ENOUGH!*

The next morning, I went to Home Depot with neither dollar nor debit card, for the sole purpose of eliciting information on creaky floors from a sales associate. I picked up a coil of hose to carry around as a prop, so that my unconsumeristic agenda would not be detected. Then I found a man named Ron, who informed me that creaky floors can result from a variety of factors, from temperature changes to poor construction.

“But what I really want to know, Ron,” I said, “is this: Once the floor creaks, is there anything that can be done? Or do I just have to deal with it?”

Here Ron began to spout off such words as “joists” and “subfloors.” Because I understood little more than that I would have to tear up the linoleum, I thanked Ron for his time

and did my best to give the impression that I intended to use his advice, which in fact I had absolutely no inclination to do.

Dejected as I was after my conversation with Ron, I was not quite ready to throw in the towel. There had to be a workable solution. So it came to be that I entered the bathroom with tools of my own.

Scissors in hand, I set about cutting a neon orange index card into strips and only hesitated a moment

to consider the bizarre nature of what I was about to do before I proceeded to neatly tape the strips onto the bathroom floor with clear packaging tape. I made a prominent dashed-line orange square around the creaky portion of the floor, which I had previously identified through a simple test administered by my foot.

When I was finished, I experimented maneuvering through the bathroom around the newly designated “do not enter” zone. It was a bit tricky at first, mainly because the zone comes right up to the sink, so that I would theoretically have only a three-inch space on which to stand tiptoed while brushing my teeth. But I soon learned that I could brace myself by moving my left foot back to the far left of the orange square, against the wall where the radiator is. This is only mildly awkward.

In just a week, I have almost effortlessly grown used to the small accommodations I have had to make to

avoid the Creak. It is with confidence that I claim this repair a success.

The floor still creaks, and in that sense I have done nothing. The problem remains, and it will remain for as long as I choose to walk around it rather than doing anything about it. I still have to hear it from time to time, since my sister periodically taunts me by dancing around inside the square when I am in earshot. On the other hand, I *have* done something; I have found a way *around* the problem, so that, as long as I’m careful, I never have to step foot in it again!

Nor do I have to deal with the inconvenience of tearing up a floor and hammering down nails. I’d probably miss the nail and land the hammer on my finger. Or maybe I’d have it all

fixed, linoleum re-laid, and then discover that the creaks were still there. *Then* I’d have to start all over again, because by that point I’d be too invested in the job to allow myself to quit.

Now every time I noiselessly sidle through my bathroom and behold the square there on the ground, I am filled with a pleasing sense of power, control, and amusement at my self-perceived ingenuity. Contrived order has led to contrived bliss, and my world is at contrived peace once more.

—*Renee Gehman, Souderton, Pennsylvania, is assistant editor of Dream-Seeker Magazine and enjoys creative problem-solving, inauthentic as it may sometimes be.*



“Religulous”— People of Faith Seen as Fish in a Barrel

A Film Review

Dave Greiser

When I was in the eighth grade, I met my first agnostic. Arnold was a soft spoken, geeky-smart boy who sat next to me in social studies class. He actually wore a pocket protector in the pocket of his button-down shirt. Arnold was politely convinced that belief in God was a crock.

And I was amazed by Arnold. Until then, I didn't know it was possible *not* to believe in God. As I attempted my first defense of the Christian faith with Arnold, the seeds of my own journey with doubt were planted, and a lifelong fascination with the relative rationality of belief was begun.

Bill Maher, the creator of the witty docu-comedy “Religulous” (and host of HBO’s “Real Time with Bill Maher”), is my friend Arnold on steroids. Maher is in no way neutral, or even polite, toward religion or religious people. Instead, he is a fervent evangelist of the gospel of doubt. “What we need to understand,” Maher preaches, “is that faith makes a virtue out of not

thinking. The plain fact is, religion must die for the world to survive.”

In Maher’s well-researched view, most of the world’s wars and many of its ugliest prejudices have their roots in religious beliefs. The fundamentalist belief in a cataclysmic Battle of Armageddon could unwittingly become a self-fulfilling prophecy in the hands of fanatical Middle Eastern zealots. Even those who see themselves as religious moderates come in for a scolding from Maher.

“You may be a moderate,” argues Maher, “but you need to know that the solace of your religion comes at a terrible price.”

“Religulous” is an equal opportunity abuser of the world’s faithful. Christian evangelists, ultra-orthodox rabbis, and Muslim clerics manage to look equally silly when seated in the interviewee’s chair next to Maher. Maher’s technique consists in flattering his unprepared subjects into dropping their guard, then pouncing. In one scene, he compliments former soul singer-turned-prosperity evangelist Jeremiah Cummings on his lizard-skin shoes and jewelry, then reels him in with a set of questions that expose the evangelist’s superficial knowledge of Jesus.

In another interview, he challenges a group of Muslim clerics arguing the peaceful nature of the Islamic faith by producing some well-chosen quotes of his own from the Koran. Perhaps the funniest moment in the film is a conversation with Arkansas Senator Mark Pryor, who expresses

doubts about evolution, then unwittingly says something so self-incriminating that your heart goes out to the man.

Maher has done his homework. He knows the Bible better than many of the Christians he talks to. He has honed his arsenal of arguments against the existence of God to a fine point. And you have to hand it to the man—he has guts. Aside from the volume of hate mail he is bound to get from, ironically,

Christians, just for making this film, Maher risks physical confrontation with several of his subjects. He tells a chapel full of burly Christian truckers just how little he thinks of their God. He walks off the set of an interview with an ultra-orthodox rabbi whose anti-Zionism leads him to doubt the veracity of the Holocaust. And he succeeds in getting himself kicked out of the Vatican and off the grounds of the Mormon Temple in Salt Lake City.

Maher may be well-informed and he is definitely gutsy, but he is by no means fair. He interviews only one genuine intellectual. Francis Collins is a biophysicist who was head of the Human Genome Project. While in that role, Collins’ lifelong agnosticism gave way first to a belief in God then to full-blown Christian faith. Collins likens the human genome to “the language of God,” through which we can understand something of the Creator’s thoughts.

Unfortunately, we don’t get to hear any of that in the film. Instead,

Maher may be well-informed and he is definitely gutsy, but he is by no means fair.

Maher chooses to talk to Collins about the reliability of the biblical gospels, a subject about which Collins knows decidedly less. Throughout the film, Maher edits the segments in such a way as to magnify the stupidity of his subjects. Occasionally he interrupts interviewees without letting them answer his questions; at other times he posts subtitles—jabbing, snide afterthoughts to his subjects' comments. In short, Maher comes across as every conservative's stereotype of a smug liberal elitist.

"Religulous" is directed by Larry Charles, who directed the 2006 film "Borat"—a similar exercise in cyni-

cism with something to offend everyone. In "Religulous," Charles' genius is limited to the film's technical side. The message of the film is pure Maher, who clearly believes that a world in which people live by reason alone is the best of all possible worlds. That belief may be the biggest leap of faith of all.

—*Dave Greiser's well-seasoned doubts about God's sovereignty took a big hit when his beloved Philadelphia Phillies won the World Series this fall. He teaches pastoral ministries, often with a goofy grin on his face, at Hesston (Kan.) College.*



If Jews and Gentiles Could Find Each Other

Reviews of The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited, of Why the Jews Rejected Jesus, and of States of Exile

Daniel Hertzler

The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited, by John Howard Yoder. Edited by Michael G. Cartwright and Peter Ochs. Eerdmans, 2003.

Why the Jews Rejected Jesus, by David Klinghoffer. Doubleday, 2005.

States of Exile: Visions of Diaspora, Witness and Return, by Alain Epp Weaver. Herald Press, 2008.

John Howard Yoder was a missionary. Not so much a street evangelist although he was not necessarily against that. In the late 1960s or early 1970s, Nelson Kauffman, director of Home Missions for Mennonite Board of Missions, conducted what he called "Witness Workshops." He invited some of us country people into Chicago and sent us out into restaurants to talk with people about the faith. Some of us found this

daunting but possible. John Howard reported that when he spoke to people they would not respond to him.

Maybe his large presence intimidated them. Perhaps the questions he raised were not the kind to which they wished to respond. He was to find his mission rather in the classroom, the lecture hall, seminars, and particularly in writing.

His influence continues after his death. In a review of *The Great Awakening* by Jim Wallis, David Dark reports that “For all Wallis’ references to celebrities, activists, and politicians, the most quoted figure in this book is John Howard Yoder” (*Christian Century*, Aug. 26, 2008, 38).

Along with the problems of war and violence, Yoder had turned his attention to the break between Jews and Christians. This volume was published after his death in 1997. Cartwright from the University of Indianapolis and Ochs from the University of Virginia have published 10 essays by Yoder along with responses by Ochs, a professor of Jewish studies. Yoder, of course, is no longer able to respond as he surely would have done.

Yoder held that Jesus and Paul had not rejected Judaism but that the rupture was more the result of Constantinianism when the church became the official religion of the Roman Empire. He would make common cause with Jews on the basis that both Anabaptists and Jews were persecuted by the official church.

Some Jews have not been unaware of these similarities. In his memoir *Land of Revelation* (Herald Press, 2004) Roy Kreider tells of visiting a

Jewish temple in Harrisonburg, Virginia. The rabbi welcomed students from Eastern Mennonite College and “detailed specific events of Mennonites being hunted down, arrested, and imprisoned because their beliefs differed from mainline denominations. He likened these experiences to the ostracism and pogroms the Jewish communities in Europe suffered” (29).

John Howard took his stand on Jeremiah’s letter to the Babylonian exiles quoted in Jeremiah 29, especially verse 7: “But seek the welfare 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.” He held that the Jews who remained in Babylon were more creative than those who returned to Jerusalem and that exile or dispersion is the appropriate stance for both Jews and Christians. He would view the free church with voluntary membership and the exiled, voluntary practicing Jewish community as partners in witness.

In addition to Jeremiah 29, Yoder found the breakdown of the wall in Ephesians 2-3 and “the vision of reconciled humanity . . . displayed in Revelation 5, 7 and 22” (22) as key texts.

In an effort to get the discussion of Jewish-Christian relations on an even keel, Yoder needed to deal with the issue of “supersessionism” (in which Christians are seen as entrusted with fulfilling God’s promises earlier made to Jews) regarding the break between the two. He wrote that “Christians interpret this as supersessionism,

whereby the Jews were left behind, no longer bearers of God’s story. Jews, on the other hand, interpret the same separation as apostasy, rebellion. Yet both parties agree on what happened and why. My claim is that they are wrong not where they differ, but where they agree” (31).

The first of Yoder’s 10 essays is entitled “It Did Not Have to Be.” He opens with the assertion that “The first mistake Christians have tended to make—for the last thousand years when thinking about Jews—is to forget the ‘Jewishness’ of Christianity, in such a way that we take for granted that the relationship between the two faiths, the two strains of history could begin with their separateness” (43).

In his response to this essay, Ochs observes, “There is potential here for a supersessionist strategy. I read these contradictory tendencies in Yoder’s Jewish-Christian writings as signs of a pioneer’s work: both reproducing the old order that nurtured him (supersessionist order) and generating a new order (beyond supersessionism)” (68).

Essay two is “Jesus the Jewish Pacifist,” and essay three is “Paul the Judaizer.” In essay four, “The Jewishness of the free church Vision,” Yoder compares Anabaptist and free church experiences of persecution with those of Jews. He finds common experiences and promotes a common cause. “The recovery of our sense of the Jewishness of original Christianity and especially of ‘free church’ renewal

should give a second wind to the forces of renewal” (112).

In response Ochs comments that “post-liberal Jews can find in these areas of Anabaptist and Mennonite behavior highly instructive demonstrations and testings of the virtues of their own Judaism” (120).

In an afterword, Cartwright proposes that Christians, Jews, and

Muslims get together to read and discuss the Scriptures with “a renewed fellowship between those people who recognize ‘Abraham’ as ‘their father’ albeit in different ways for different reasons that are expressed in diverse languages” (233).

Finally there are two appendices. The first is a condensation of a sermon by Yoder, “Salvation is of the Jews,” based on John 4. The second is an accounting by Cartwright of “Mennonite Missions in Israel and the Peacemaking of Mennonite Central Committee in Palestine (1949-2002).” Cartwright conveys some admiration of these Mennonite efforts but finds that the two programs “have not been able to find a way to collaborate within a unified missiological mandate” (267).

If we were looking for a counterpoint to the careful conversation in the Cartwright-Ochs book, we might find it in *Why the Jews Rejected Jesus*. Klinghoffer seems not to have heard of Anabaptists or the free churches but is quite aware of Mel Gibson’s film

Cartwright proposes that Christians, Jews, and Muslims get together to read and discuss the Scriptures with “a renewed fellowship. . . .”

“The Passion of the Christ” and of evangelical Christians. One of them, a window washer, evidently tried to convert him.

He would likely reject most of what Yoder has written in *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*. Indeed, he perceives that the break between Jews and Christians was a good thing.

He considers that if the Jews had not rejected Jesus, what became Christianity might have remained a Jewish sect. “Had the Jews not rejected Jesus, had Paul not turned the church leadership to a new course, the nascent faith would in all likelihood have perished along with all the other heterodox Jewish sects that disappeared after the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple by the Romans in 70 C.E. There would be no Christianity, no Christian Europe, and no Western civilization as we know it” (8).

Some of us in the free church tradition who remember the European persecution of Jews, the Crusades, and the Reformation wars are less enthusiastic than he. We also mourn the violence of “Christian” Europeans against the Native Americans and are not entirely convinced by his characterization of the U.S. as “the most tolerant and good-hearted in history. All this is the fruit of the Jewish rejection of Jesus” (8-9).

Having stated his case at the beginning, he develops it chapter by chapter. He critiques the New Testament Gospels, particularly the em-

phasis on Jesus as the fulfillment of messianic prophecies. He is particularly negative in his treatment of Paul due to Paul’s criticism of the Jewish torah. Indeed he wonders whether Paul really was a Jew. “I would suggest that many Jews found him to be an outrageous character not only because he led Jews away from the commandments. . . . They also sensed him to be a deceiver” (112-113).

He reviews medieval debates between Jews and Christians and moves on to the Holocaust. He quotes a number of Jews who hold the church ultimately responsible for this but then comes to Rabbi Heschel, who “pointed out that ‘Naziism in its very roots was a rebellion against the Bible, against the God of Abraham’” (191). A major concluding critique is of the position of a Jewish Christian, Michael L. Brown. Klinghoffer indicates that Brown has answered 124 Jewish objections to Jesus and cites 10 of them along with his own counter-answers. He observes that for all the effort and money spent, the Jews for Jesus movement has been remarkably unsuccessful.

In the end he comes back to his opening assertion that it was better for the world that the Jews rejected Jesus. He concludes that in the providence of God the Jews are priests and the Christians laity. “It would seem that the Christian Church now plays the role of congregation, as the Muslim umma also does, with the Jews serving in the ministerial position.

In the end he comes back to his opening assertion that it was better for the world that the Jews rejected Jesus.

Christians and Muslims alike know of the God of Abraham only because they met him in the Bible” (219). We can imagine that John Howard Yoder would have a comment on that.

From 1992 until 2006, Alain Epp Weaver was a Mennonite Central Committee worker in the Middle East, first as an English teacher and later as an administrator. The worker was also a theologian and reflected on the issues growing out of his work. In the foreword to *States of Exile*, Jewish scholar Daniel Boyarin identifies him as “a true disciple of Yoder “but points out that he has moved beyond Yoder, who is perceived to impose upon Jews their own version of Constantianism (9-10).

Epp Weaver’s book is organized by the three topics in the subtitle: one section on Diaspora, a section on Witness and the third on Return. Regarding the Palestinian-Israeli dilemma, he asks “Must return for one people result in exile of another? Does Babylon stand in irreducible opposition to Zion? Or can exile and return instead be conceptualized as dynamically interrelated?” (17).

He proposes that exile is a style of life, that the three themes of the book “refer to intertwined states of being” and that “Genuine return . . . is not ultimately a departure from Diaspora, the restoration to a pure origin, but instead involves a homecoming in which exile shapes the meaning of home.” Included in this will be to recognize that “to live lightly on the land is an integral part of Christian witness” (18).

This seems like a further development of a concept articulated by Yoder that the church should expect not to be in charge. It suggests that the so-called American dream has not been theologically responsible. From the beginning, European colonists saw the new land as available to them regardless of who was here before them. The Zionists appear to see Palestine in the same way.

Epp Weaver, stating his position early, observes that “whether in the context of one state or two, the Palestinian other, the Jewish other must no longer be viewed as a threat to be walled off or erased, but as an integral part of one’s own identity. Nationalistic projects of separation and domination might prove successful for years, even decades . . . but they will not create lasting security or the conditions for genuine reconciliation” (20).

Although Epp Weaver’s thinking rests on Yoder’s, he is troubled by Yoder’s retaining of theological control in his dialogue with Jews.

While Yoder commendably highlights the convergence of some Jewish and some Christian understandings of how God’s people should live in exile, he does not provide a positive theological account of Jewish-Christian difference, with a possibility that Christians might be genuinely surprised by new discoveries in their encounters with Jews . . . (26)

His own perspective on the Palestinian-Israeli hiatus is that the only

solution is to have one binational state. An example of the present unreality is what has happened to the Gaza strip, “turning Gaza into a large, open-air prison for nearly 1.5 million inhabitants” (119).

He indicates that some Israelis have anticipated the binational option and quotes Avraham Burg, who said, “I am afraid of the day when all of them . . . would put their weapons down and say ‘one man, one vote’” (117). Of course, a state combining both races would make Israelis a minority of the population.

Epp Weaver observes that Israelis and Palestinians are too tied up with the myth of violence. He holds that Christian pacifists have a role to play in helping them search for alternatives to violence (140).

An epilogue is entitled “Breaches in the Walls.” He proposes that “the

church that confesses faith in a Lord whose reign extends from the creation to the apocalypse” should be “prepared to relinquish control of theological conversations, to be a servant in its encounters with its neighbors, co-workers, and fellow-citizens in the city of its exile, ready not simply to testify to Christ’s lordship, but to receive God’s Word anew” (159).

In response we can only tremble and ask who is up to such a challenge. Yet it seems an answer to Klinghoffer who is too satisfied with things as they are. And in his gentle critique of Yoder, Epp Weaver has advanced the conversation.

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



Mid-Journey Parenting

Michael A. King

It was the fifth time we had done this, share Denver as father and daughter, so the spirits of the younger girl, going back all the way to the first trip when she was 13, hovered near, seeming almost as present as the married woman now plunging so quickly, to our mutual shock, toward age 30. This presence of my daughter as many different girls and women proved an opportunity to ponder the parenting journey.

I say ponder, not conquer. As a father now for nearly three decades, one thing I can see is that parenting involves an ever-shifting set of challenges and opportunities, not merely tasks to be mastered on the way to the parenting diploma. So I see more clearly than at the beginning how hard it is to glimpse what lies ahead.

But I did hope maybe I was learning a few things as I visited with all five versions of my daughter Kristy. Actually, not just five, since once five were flitting through my soul, how could I not see so many other versions, from the baby who dropped to the floor on Christmas morning (I had taught her to roll into my arms but she only got the rolling part; her mother was not pleased), through the toddler who crawled across

papers on my desk before computers were invented, to the stage manager of her sisters spied in home videos who became a theater stage manager in college days. Among the things I think I learned were these:

Mark the journey. We didn't know at the start of our Denver saga what a way to mark the journey it would become. The first time came about because we thought she would enjoy accompanying me, a book editor, to a book convention. It was so much fun we did it again. Then we mixed in our family tradition of taking special parent/child trips at key junctures in their lives. So Kristy asked me to take her back to Denver for her "18 trip." During that trip she hoped we'd return for her "21 trip." Then at 21 she wandered if just maybe we could still do it even if someday she got married. Wondrously enough, six years later we did. And how we celebrated on the fifth trip the haunts and memories and life stages marked by the prior four.

Grasp that parenting stays intense. The most surprising learning is how intense parenting remains after children grow up. Maybe that feeling ebbs as children grow even older, but so far I don't see the signs. My heart still falls and leaps, sometimes even more intensely than it once did.

Back then the task was to get my children safely to adulthood. After that, I vaguely expected, parents rest. And in some ways we do. Diapers, ear infections, school, driving lessons,

first crush and first crushed heart—all completed. Time for the hammock.

Except. Now it's . . . Will she marry? Who? How will it go? Can she handle grad school, part-time work, marriage, and all that debt? Is her health insurance good enough? What do I do when she's hurting and I can't go with her like we used to for fast-food breakfast before school?

Cherish the gift. I did manage, even as the utterly imperfect father of young children I was, to celebrate reasonably often the gift my daughters were. Thank God I did, since how quickly we do travel from the daughter selecting Misty out of the Norwegian Elkhound litter to the daughter earning a degree in environmental studies.

Yet there can be more space to see our children as the artwork they are once they leave home. We're still implicated—seeing hints of ourselves for better and worse in the child before us. But our day-to-day responsibility has faded. And being with a child who lives far from home becomes a special occasion, no longer another routine along with toasting the bagel.

So now instead of being almost within the painting which is our child's life, we can sit outside it, gaze at it, cherish it. Not because it's flawless. True art never is; the greatest art is riven with flaws and tragedy even as sun dapples leaves in crystalline air. But because it is what it is: our child, whom we love, in whom we are (to

There can be more space to see our children as the artwork they are once they leave home.

echo a Voice cherishing son Jesus) well pleased.

We flew separately back to our separate coasts, Kristy and I. She was perfectly capable of doing this. But since I had sponsored the trip, I felt while I awaited confirmation of her safe arrival as if no time had passed at all: She had just been born, she was in my arms, and it was my calling to keep

her safe. This is mid-journey parenting: holding a baby while the woman flies away.

—*Michael A. King, Telford, Pennsylvania, is publisher, Cascadia Publishing House LLC; editor, DreamSeeker Magazine; and a pastor. This article first appeared in The Mennonite (Oct. 7, 2008, p. 30).*

Grace

To encourage
perfectly centered yolks,
the instructions say,
gently jostle the kettle
when the water begins to boil.

And I wonder
how centered does a yolk have to be?
is not boiling
fire enough?

How much jiggle
can a boiling egg take
before it cracks?

And is perfectly centered normal?
preferable?
better somehow?
Or would a simmered,
off-center but
willing egg
do just as well?

—*Brenda Hartman-Souder*



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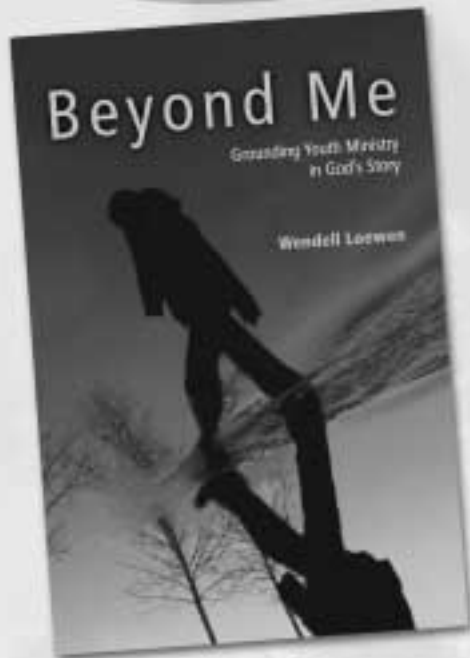
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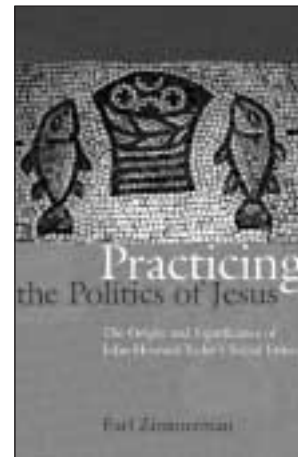
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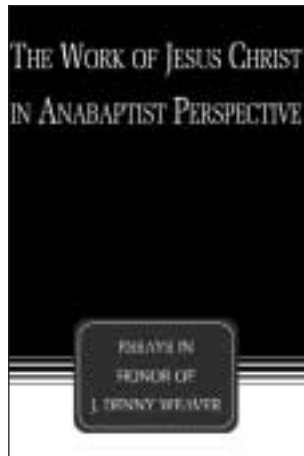


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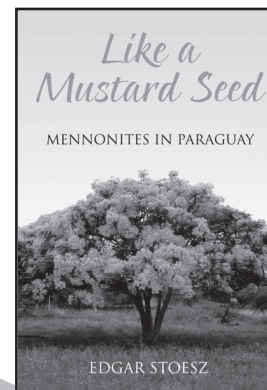
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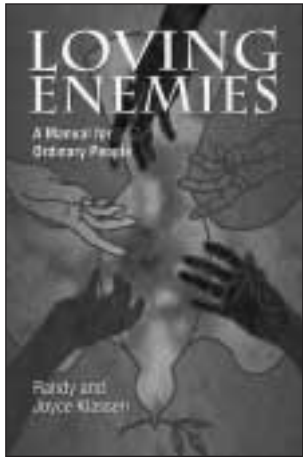
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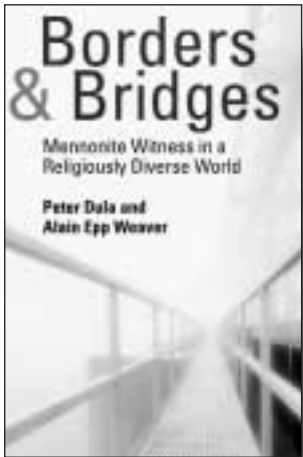
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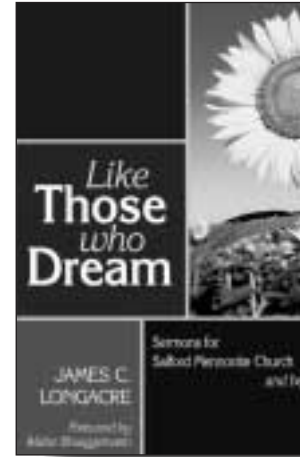
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Called Home

In a dream near dawn,
 the sun was waiting
 to spring the day.
It faintly defined the familiar room,
 outlining the four-poster bed,
 the twining ivy at the window,
 your picture on the wall.
I saw a figure standing in the doorway,
 waiting and quiet, not hurried.
I was not frightened. He was not unexpected.
He had come once before.
When he spoke, I recognized his voice,
 soft and kind, yet firm.
“It is time to go,” he said.

—Helen Wade Alderfer, Goshen, Indiana, is part of a poetry writing group, volunteers at the local elementary school, remains active in her assisted living and church communities, and was long an editor of various Mennonite magazines. She is author of The Mill Grinds Fine: Collected Poems (DreamSeeker Books, 2009) the collection from which this poem comes (used by permission, all rights reserved).