

DreamSeeker Magazine

Voices from the Soul



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and much more

Winter 2010

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Editorial: Coping with the Wild Things

Kirsten Beachy's review of "Where the Wild Things Are" opens this issue of *DreamSeeker* Magazine because it seems not only to capture the spirit of the film so well but also to invite us to consider how we cope with all the Wild Things of life. In the film as Beachy portrays it, there are wild things and power struggles and hurts and aches for love tumbling everywhere. There is no magic wand for straightening everything out—except maybe being humbled enough to know we all need a mom.

And I'm struck as I ponder what else is in these pages that boy we do need something, and maybe a mom is as good a way as any to visualize it. The responses and letters engaging atheism, faith, and homosexuality remind us again what a ragged set of issues tumbled through the pages of the Autumn 2009 issue and many of our lives. And the poets continue to tumble through more issues.

Then Mel Leaman dares to enter the wild traumas of his family's history. Dan Liechty assumes we all must cope with Wild Things—and that one way we can work at this is through taming our feelings by seeking to act as "Mensches."

Renee Gehman worries that as the norms shift, wildness is unleashed. She helps us ponder how to use norms

to tame things that get too wild. Tim Stair worries that maybe things are too wild at Salvation Church—but then maybe what he ends up feeling is not too distant from, okay, there is a mom we can trust here. Deborah Good helps us see how important, amid our daily wild events, a community of those who care can be.

Alan Soffin evokes the wild racist things that stalked his own mom—and manages nevertheless to leave us haunted by images of those whose fragile sainthood was stronger even than anything thrown at them.

Rachael Moore-Beitler turns toward the wild dynamics and issues posed by her and our lifestyle choices, and finds hope in the mantra of the fish Nemo, "just keep swimming." Then maybe the wildest thing we face is death. What does death entail? Is there anything like a mom after that? Dan Hertzler reviews a book on heaven bearing on such matters. Then quickly we shift to Noel King, whose light touch reminds us in turn to lighten up.

I wrap up this issue with memories of the day the road itself became the wild thing I needed to be preserved from. And I was. A mom or dad or Something seemed to join me in that mud. —*Michael A. King*

Kirsten Beachy's review ... seems ... to invite us to consider how we cope with all the Wild Things of life.



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Dear Editors:

Alan Soffin's "An Atheist Finds God Yet Not God," *DreamSeeker Magazine* Autumn 2009, is insightful, thought-provoking, and helpful in the search for God through "philosophical theology"—as far as that can lead us. Soffin's distant Father one could call upon in desperate situations may be less distant, and more certain than we can find through reason alone.

In any search for God, we must seek his inspiration as promised in the Scriptures, both Old and New. Said Job, "there is a spirit in man and the inspiration of the Almighty giveth them understanding." The Bible's prophets, Peter tells us, were "holy men of God, spake as they were moved upon by the Holy Ghost." Thus, the inspired words of the many prophets, testifying of God as they touch our spirit, hold the key to belief and faith in God. The best witness is his Son, his life and his words. This witness and these promises of wisdom and belief and faith are far greater than the philosophers ever could convey through reason.

My search for faith, in a way far less sophisticated than reason, relied on the wisdom of those holy men of God whose testimonies quietly convey assurance and conviction that God lives. That conviction received was after supplication to God on bended knee with weeping eye. Our heavenly Father speaks to our spirit and tells us that he is here and that he loves us. Alas, too few of God's children have felt that touch of his hand and that shower of warmth and love.

This assurance and faith come most often when we ask him.

We are part of this universe "in every way but our thinking," says Alan. True perhaps, but it is more than that. It is that thinking with our spirit that provides that link with the Father. Indeed, it is Job's "spirit in man" that is the link to the receiving of inspiration and belief and faith in God. I know this is true.

My thanks to Alan Soffin for an exceptionally lucid and well reasoned article. And my thanks to *DSM* for providing more than a little food for thought. —*Edward Telford Stevenson*

Dear Editors:

Thanks for publishing Ray Fisher's "Response to *Stumbling Toward a Genuine Conversation on Homosexuality*," *DreamSeeker Magazine* Autumn 2009. I found it wonderfully thoughtful, balanced, wise. It made me hopeful too that Fisher's goal of moving the conversation forward will be realized. —*Barbara Esch Shisler*

Discussion, Harold Miller and Ray Fisher, "Response to Stumbling Toward a Genuine Conversation on Homosexuality," Fisher, DSM Autumn 2009.

What a life story, Ray. Beachy Amish to Harvard; agnostic/atheist to one helping lesbians and gays and church leaders to hear each other. Yes! Welcome!

Here's a brief response to your helpful piece. You noted that the essays in *Stumbling* "contained a challenge to the lesbian and gay

community: Show us what a holistic life of same-sex conjugal commitment looks like. Is there a proposed standard of Christ-like behavior that our gay and lesbian sons and daughters are prepared to adhere to?" You wrote, "It is incumbent on us, the gay and lesbian sons and daughters of the church, to answer that call."

I deeply appreciate your instincts there, Ray. It would indeed be very valuable for your community to write up guidelines or standards of the lifestyle you feel called to live.

Yes, heterosexuals, as you point out, do not have a pretty track record when it comes to maintaining their sexual commitments. But the fact that they do have well-articulated ideals does a least give them a modicum of pull in that direction.

Yes, same-sex couples, as you note, don't enjoy the same support network that straight couples tend to have. But as those couples articulate the kind of "holistic life" they are striving for, then those around can call them toward their self-chosen goals.

If those couples in your circle who are "in stable, long-term relationships" also have sexual exclusivity as their expectation and goal, that would affect me. As I said elsewhere, I would still be personally convinced that homosexual sex is wrong because of my understanding of the Bible (especially Rom. 1). But it wouldn't seem so obviously and starkly wrong.

If those couples in your circle who are "in stable, long-term relationships" also have sexual exclusivity as their expectation and goal, that would affect me.

Certainly if your community is not upholding sexual monogamy, you are at variance with the Anabaptist Christian community as a whole. And that will get in the way when you work to get Mennonite Church USA

to change its stance on sexuality, to adjust its boundaries, and stop disciplining over same-sex covenanted conjugal relationships.

Thanks for your explanation of why your community has chosen to include bisexuals (to avoid internecine bias). I appreciate that you nonetheless were willing to leave that term behind when it causes offense and just use

the terms *lesbian* and *gay* so that we can "move beyond semantics and focus on the underlying substance."

You are an important moderating voice, Ray, in the dialogue our church has been talking about and seems to be getting more serious about. —*Harold N. Miller*

Harold, many thanks for your generous words and rapid response. I wanted to respond to a few of your points as food for thought pending further exchanges later:

(1) On the nature of gay relationships. I think that many many gay couples indeed do hold monogamy up as an ideal that they seek for themselves. Of course some do not, but that same dichotomy exists with straight couples. As I've said, most of my gay friends are in stable, long-term relationships. I've not been nosey

enough to ask about their attitude toward exclusivity, but generally I have no reason to suspect any straying off the path—and we're in some cases talking of relationships of 15-20 years or more.

Since I believe in full openness and honesty, I can admit that, in my “atheist period,” when work and international travel and visa difficulties separated Juan Carlos and me for extended periods of time, he and I both experienced some straying off the path—but really out of the loneliness of separation and not because our own relationship was unsatisfying.

And as an atheist I felt bound by a moral duty to treat Juan Carlos fairly but not a religious duty to be exclusive in all circumstances. Certainly my preference during those periods would have been to avoid separation and to respect exclusiveness.

Am I willing to adopt a stricter standard in the context of belonging to a community of faith? You bet! I doubt that our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters who are seeking to define their place in the church see it differently. If seeing us aspire for exclusive covenanted relationships as an explicit goal would remove your biggest stumbling block, we're well on our way to working together, since that would only be giving voice to a human desire that many human beings—both straight and gay—feel.

(2) As to the challenge to articulate a set of sexual standards. On reflection, months after first penning

those lines, I continue to find the challenge fair, but I think it inappropriate to articulate a standard that is more stringent than that followed by many of the straight young people in MC-USA—i.e., I would not want to buy into or perpetuate a double standard.

If asked to draw up such a standard today, I would compose it in two parts (and this is thinking “out loud” in *rough draft*): (a) a set of principles that talk about the power of sexuality to create healing and commitment or to cause harm and destruction, and the responsibility of people of faith to ensure that they are using sexuality in uplifting, healing ways; and (b) an affirmation that the importance and primacy of sexual expression in the context of exclusive, covenanted relationships. I might even acknowledge that the latter kind of relationship is the only one given positive sanction by the church.

Clearly this is a first rough attempt, in need of further thought and refinement. I would be interested in hearing how other readers respond to this suggestion.

(3) I'd be curious to know how many of our gay and lesbian Mennonite brothers and sisters you know. If not many, I'd love to try to change that! When time allows, I hope you will allow me to set up meetings with some members of our community.

There is much more that could be said on all these topics, and I look forward to taking this up again in the future! Blessings. —*Ray Fisher*

Share My Bread

On my back they plowed the furrows,*
On my back they sowed the seed,
On my back grew loneliness and fear,
On my back grew want and need.

Irons joined my hands together,
Irons joined my feet as well,
Irons kept my heart from dancing,
Irons drove me into hell.

In the shadows of the dungeon,
In the dampness of the pit,
There is darkness all around me
With no hope of candles lit.

Can't you see my bleeding furrows,
Can't you cut the cords of death,
Can't you help me fill my lungs now,
Can't you help me take a breath?

Then, there's a voice before I end it,
There are words on printed page,
There's a message from another,
There's a chance within this cage.

“This is what you're missing brother,
This is what you're searching for,
This is truth and mercy kissing,
This is peace outside your door.

“Long before you ever heard me,
Long ago I pitched my tent
In the garden of your longing,
In the pain that you now vent.



“I was not the one who marked you
With the evil of the plow,
Rather I am here to heal you,
Ease your pain both here and now.

“May you know that you are welcome,
As my table full is spread,
For *all people* who would gather
Are welcomed here to share my bread.”

*See Psalm 129

—*Don Theomann published an article in the now extinct Christian Living in April 1980. After struggling over 40 years to reject his homosexual orientation, finding truth and mercy kissing outside his door has allowed him to invite peace to rule his heart and accept the gifts his orientation offers.*

Wild Things Need a Mother, Not a King

Kirsten Beachy

When Max parts from Carol, the dearest of his monstrous friends on the island of the Wild Things, he’s stumped for words. They’ve let each other down but love each other deeply. As the wind pushes Max’s boat further from shore, the two stare at each other helplessly. On actor Max Records’ face, each emotion is new and genuine, not easily named, but we can see he’s too overcome to speak.

Carol the monster’s dirty CGI (computer-generated image) face trembles at the edge of tears. He wades into the sea after Max, his dread-locked legs disappearing underwater, the waves lapping his striped belly.

Finally the spirit intercedes with groans too deep for words. Two-horned Carol sighs, *aroooo*, and Max in his bedraggled wolf suit howls back. Soon the cliffs of the wild island are echoing with their howls of love, loss, and marrow-deep kinship.

“**W**here the Wild Things Are” is no common children’s movie. Spike Jonze’s adaptation of Maurice Sendak’s classic doesn’t rely on gags; it seeks no perfect resolution. The plot isn’t based on a quest or crime that

serves as a skeleton for a string of awesome action sequences and one-liners. Scenes of wild destruction and celebration alternate with quiet moments—watching, waiting, going for walks. The dramatic tension of the film lies in interpersonal bonds that grow, tighten, stretch, snap, and are retied imperfectly. For example, (spoiler alert!) before all the wild rum-

pusing is over, someone will lose an arm and the replacement limb will be laughably inadequate.

Not everyone sees Jonze's approach as an improvement on the story. My cousin, something of a wild thing himself at Max's age, warned his Facebook friends to skip the movie: "The wild things are just hairy emo kids."

Yes, perhaps. But these hairy emo kids have much to remind us about the realities of childhood. Jonze's beasts are beautifully rendered through a process that seamlessly layers costumed actors with puppetry with CGI to create breathing, recognizable versions of Sendak's monster drawings. Max's imaginary world is uncannily human.

In the real world, Max contends with an absent father, a sister maturing beyond his reach, and a mother (Catherine Keener) stretched thin with work and worry. He worries that the sun will one day die.

Jonze gives Max problems beyond the scope of his powers. They can't be made right. The best he can do is entertain his mother with vampire sto-

ries as a brief respite from her tense work situation. But he adds to her stress, too, trashing his sister's room, climbing on the counters, rampaging down the hall. "Max, you're out of control!" his mother screams, as he flees from the house and away to the sea, where he'll find a boat that takes him to the wild island.

The wild things long for a king to make things right, but they have a habit of devouring their monarchs. They lift the royal crown and scepter from a pile of charred bones. Max bluffs his way into kingship: "I have powers from other lands, from ancient times. Don't make me show you!" He unwittingly signs up for a savior role.

"Will you keep out all the sadness?" Carol asks. Max assures them that he has a sadness shield, "big enough for all of us."

At first things go well for King Max ("Fresh king!" Judith warbles, as the fun begins): He starts a wild rumpus, brings back K. W. a beast who's been drifting away from the group, and the monsters all sleep in a happy pile. He rallies the creature to construct a massive fort and makes big plans: "We'll have an ice cream parlor . . . a detective agency . . . our own language!"

But saving the wild things proves to be a difficult task. Like Christ's disciples, the creatures jostle for their leader's favor. Judith asks Max, "How does it work around here? Are we the same, or are some of us better?" But

Max doesn't have a good answer. He wants to keep everyone happy, but he can't deliver the peaceable kingdom he promised.

After conflict and sorrow return to the wild island, Carol challenges him to make things right: "He has powers. He told us. Right Max? Show us." But Max's anticlimactic gestures—a little boy playing at sorcery—disappoint. "That's what we waited for?" ask the monsters. "There's no such thing as a king," the bird-monster Douglas concludes. "He's just a boy pretending to be a wolf, pretending to be a king."

As the action spirals out of control, Max flees from an angry beast. His hiding place is a sort of death, his removal from it a resurrection. But he doesn't return to the wild things transfigured. Instead, he's humbled, ready to set aside all claims to transcendent power.

The best thing Max leaves for the wild things is not the fort built by monster strength and the powers of Max's imagination. It's a crudely constructed heart, a message of love built of broken sticks. The wild things don't need a ruler; they need unconditional love. Before he leaves, Max says, "I wish you guys had a mom."

Imagine, for a moment, Christ of

the Wild Things, or better, a Madonna of the Wild Things, a great loving beast who cradles you in her hairy paws, one who accepts that "it's hard to be a family," who loves the whole disorderly pile, who clutches you to her massive, matted breast, even as you rant, or cry. Even when you bite.

Because "Where the Wild Things Are" is no common kid's movie, it doesn't end with an easy "I love you, Mom. I'm sorry." Max's homecoming takes place without conversation, but his dinner is waiting on the table. Behind the final, speaking look he shares with his mother, I imagine the howls of the beasts again, expressing emotions too deep for words.

—Kirsten Beachy, Harrisonburg, Virginia, teaches writing at Eastern Mennonite University, communes with ducks and honeybees, and works on several books-in-progress. Her most recent works of fiction and nonfiction appear in *Shenandoah*, *Rhubarb*, and the forthcoming Norton Anthology of Hint Fiction. She is accepting submissions for a collection of creative writing inspired by *The Martyrs Mirror*, see ad back pages of this DreamSeeker Magazine issue.



The Face of Forgiveness

Mel Leaman

“Forgive us . . . as we forgive.”—Matthew 6:24

She was the one person who knew the truth about my father’s transgressions on the mission field some seventy years ago. This 95-year-old matriarch of service leaned as heavy on the table as the words she had to say. With lowered gaze and softened voice she stumbled over Dad’s offenses. Her countenance suddenly brightened: “But, your mother was a saint. Like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego she went through the fire and didn’t smell like smoke” (Dan. 3:25).

My mother often read Lettie B. Cowman’s book *Streams in the Desert*. In the October 17 entry, Cowman cites Galatians 6:14 as a backdrop to the trials of the apostle Paul and Silas. She writes in her typical disconsolate fashion, “They had asked to be meek and He had broken their hearts; they had asked to be dead to the world, and He slew all their living hopes; they had asked to be made like Him, and He placed them in the furnace.”

My mother wrote: “October 17—the very best in the book—1942.” That was the year Dad told the

truth. The mission board rightfully sent them home. Mom was not a stranger to the fiery furnace. Then in her late twenties, she must have shared this reading with her friend, now 95 these generations later. I wonder if they wept together.

She bought this devotional for my father on their first Christmas in 1935. It was not meant to be a pre-nuptial promissory note. I find sad irony in knowing it was this very book that helped her endure the sexual improprieties of the man she loved.

For Mom, a goodly part of her Christian sojourn was about suffering, trusting God, and the attempt to walk in the freedom of forgiveness. The smoldering ashes of dashed hopes from other offenses would leave the seven siblings smelling like smoke, but Mom would not let the pungency of unforgiveness linger. In that commitment, she was a saint.

My father was also a saint. Two years ago I visited the Tanzanian village where my parents served. To my great fortune I interviewed seven elders in their 80’s and 90’s who came to Christ through Dad’s and Mom’s ministry. They knew my father’s heart.

The common question I asked was, “What was my father like?” Without exception each person poured out accolades of praise and affection. They remembered him as one of the most loving missionaries they knew. Three of the seven emphati-

cally told me, “Be like your father.” In some ways, minus Dad’s shadow-side, that’s just what I hope to be.

Dad practiced what he preached about Jesus’ last words: “Forgive them.” My father was very compassionate. Time and time again the poor were seemingly thankless recipients of

Dad’s benevolence. During later years, when he invested in real-estate, the rich connived without remorse. Dad had the audacity to believe that love and forgiveness spoke louder than lawsuits and retribution. In times of family crisis he would make pastoral visits to

those who had hurt him. He helped without mention of past offenses.

Years later some came back to say “thanks,” others to seek forgiveness, and a few to find freedom in the love of Jesus Christ. “Forgive them.” Those are powerful last words!

The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche considered Christian virtue a manipulative means of “will to power.” He held disdain for apparent weaknesses like kindness and forgiveness. My family struggled with many sins and strained relationships that had the potential to devastate any sense of kindred spirit between us. Anger, fear, frustration, hate, hesitancy to trust, demands for justice, and desire for vengeance all played a part in our relationships. Nietzsche, in his twisted way, would have loved that part of us.

Yet there was a greater love that drew us. It, in fact, defined us. A cross

I find sad irony in knowing it was this very book that helped her endure the sexual improprieties of the man she loved.

stood at the core of our corporate heart. Notwithstanding the tears of separation, the years of counseling, the heartache of words and ways that diminished us, and the face-to-face confrontations that empowered us, our faith in the hope of the cross became our systemic salvation. As long as we could see the cross we would not be blinded by our brokenness.

Each of us fought for ourselves, but we all knew we must also fight for the other in some ultimate story of forgiveness. We were raised on a host of biblical passages and parables that reminded us of our own need for mercy, grace, and forgiveness, so we could not simply point fingers.

Somehow we had to be ambassadors of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:20) for each other. We had to learn how to “speak the truth in love . . . and grow up into Christ” (Eph. 4:15). It is tough to turn toward the offender, state your case, and call for a new way of relating. We did our best to turn our swords into plowshares (Isa. 2:4).

Forgiveness, we discovered, is not conditioned by forgetfulness, but it does require the determination to lay down our weapons of just retribution. Then our hands are free to open the door for restored relationship. However, there are no guarantees. It takes two to tango and trust must be earned. We are still learning the art of being “as wise as serpents, but as innocent as doves” (Luke 10:16).

The cross is an intolerable offense to most of us, not because a good man died but because it seeks to excise the human desire for vengeance and appropriate retribution.

The moment of reconciliation between the Old Testament characters Jacob and Esau leaves the older brother free of fiery furnace smoke. The younger sibling, Jacob, plays some dastardly tricks on Esau. He spends years on the run in fear that Esau will take his life. Now, the day of reckoning is upon him. Esau sees Jacob from a distance and runs to meet him. The younger shakes in fear, but the elder “falls on his neck and kisses him” (Gen. 33:4).

Jacob in astonishment looks at his brother and says, “Truly, to see your face is like seeing the face of God” (Gen. 33:10). Like the cross, this is a scandalous picture of the power of weakness. Esau is a saint. There is no scent of smoke on his clothes!

The cross is an intolerable offense to most of us, not because a good man died but because it seeks to excise the human desire for vengeance and appropriate retribution. We demand that everybody get just what is deserved. That’s only fair!

Jesus turns our sense of justice upside-down. The world stands by the Calvary cross to watch what Jesus does with vengeance and violence. As the old hymn notes, “he could have called ten-thousand angels” and blitzed his enemies with celestial wrath.

But he didn’t. The crowd is astounded by an incredible, if not cow-

ardly, act as Jesus cries out: “Father, forgive them.” What strength is there in such weakness?

Retribution is much more gratifying than absolution. Yet Jesus invites us to “pick up the cross and follow” (Luke 9:23). He challenges us to be daring enough to believe that he has “overcome the world” which lives by sword of mouth and hand (John 16:33).

There is another world, another kingdom that beckons us. In that kingdom, forgiveness trumps vengeance. In that world there is no greater gift than the power to birth new creation from the chaos of our lives. The potentialities of that world are at hand in each moment the heart is hurt. I want that world! Its gaze is focused on the face of Jesus.

The final snapshot of the Leaman clan will someday be taken. When all

the stories are told and it is hung in the hall of history, our family framed will look like forgiveness. There may still be a lingering scent of smoke in the room, but salvation will be in our eyes. Send my regrets to Nietzsche.

—*Mel Leaman, West Grove, Pennsylvania, is Associate Professor of Religion, Lincoln University. Leaman was raised in a Mennonite home, then following college and a few years of teaching, he was Christian Education and Youth Director at Asbury United Methodist Church, Maitland, Florida, and joined the UMC. Long a minister in Ohio and Pennsylvania, he received a D.Min. in marriage and family from Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1990. He can be reached at jmleaman@comcast.net or mleaman@lu.lincoln.edu*



Be a Mensch, the Rest May Follow!

Dan Liechty

I have spent the last dozen years as a Gentile member of a Jewish Reform congregation. The emphasis on family and ethics (while wrestling with the meanings of ethnicity) makes this Mennonite feel right at home.

There are many things that my congregation could learn from the Mennonite approach to religion and community, such as the importance of forgiveness and not holding grudges. And there are many things Mennonites could learn from a Jewish approach to religion and community. The relationship between thought and action, motives and deeds, is one of these.

Jesus rightly emphasized the importance of cultivating righteous inner motives attuned to the Spirit of the Living and Loving God. A number of Jesus' teachings and parables revolve around the general idea that motives and inner thoughts are significant.

I see now, however, that as this basic teaching was communicated to me through pietistic Mennonite Sunday school, Bible school, general Sunday service preaching, as well as annual week-long revival meetings, the message clearly got off track. There the focus

was on the need to examine scrupulously and carefully all inward thoughts, feelings, and motivations for signs of hatred, anger, pride, greed, selfishness, and lust—and to banish these thoughts and inner feelings, purifying the heart through renewed repentance.

Furthermore, good deeds done from impure motives were but dross in the eyes of God (who sees what is hidden in your heart), acts of hypocrisy at best. Coming to the Lord's Table without thoroughly and meticulously examining your inmost thoughts and feelings was to participate in your own damnation.

I struggled for years to live up to this standard of what I understood to be Christian spiritual perfection, only to realize again and again that, as Bob Dylan sang it, that "if my thought dreams could be seen, they'd probably put my head in a guillotine. . . ." Too much of my life was spent running from the spiritual guillotine I imagined God held over my head.

Only relatively late in life did I come to understand that to have a head and heart full of strong emotions, feelings, and thoughts, both positive and negative, was simply to be human. Through the socialization process, in the family, the faith community and the wider society, we

learn to balance these strong inner urgings and mold them into motivation for positive living. We learn to control them, to live with them and not let them get in our way, but we do not erase them.

Reform Judaism is very realistic and redemptive in this regard. It says, in effect, become a Mensch (a doer of good deeds) and don't worry yourself to death about your inner thoughts and desires.

They are a problem only if you find these should hinder your becoming a Mensch.

In other words, take care of that Samaritan on the side of road, and don't beat yourself up for the fact that while doing so, you grumble about it inside your head and wish you could be somewhere else. Let good deeds become your habit, and over time (who knows?) you might find your inner desires conforming to your actions. It's a process; relax already, and give it some time.

But above all else, become a Mensch, a habitual doer of good deeds. Neither God nor human can expect more (or less!) of you.

—Dan Liechty, Normal, Illinois, teaches human behavior in the School of Social Work, Illinois State University.

Become a Mensch (a doer of good deeds) and don't worry yourself to death about your inner thoughts and desires.



Changing Norms

Renee Gehman

In 1956, Elvis Presley swiveled his hips on Ed Sullivan, and We the People had a question or two about his televised gyrations. Is this “family appropriate”? Couldn’t more of this have been censored with filming from the waist up? And what of the screaming girls, who sound as if with each full swivel they come one step closer to being infatuated to death, or at least inflicted with post-gyration-stress disorder?

Fast forward fifty-plus years and Adam Lambert, “American Idol” runner up, becomes the subject of similar debate after his “American Music Awards” performance, which includes background dancers “simulating sex” as well as a passionate kiss shared by Lambert and his male keyboardist during the song. I watched videos of Presley and Lambert back to back, and my, how the norms have changed!

Norms: the accepted and expected practice in a given societal setting, without being law. If it is the law to drive 35 miles per hour, for instance, it is a common norm for people to drive 40. If someone were driving exactly 35, many would be frustrated by this case of law trumping norm. Some might even find themselves strangling the steering wheel and shouting “DRIVE!!!!” I may or may not speak from personal experience.

Norms bend with time and travel, and by travel, I don’t necessarily mean international travel (though they change there too), just travel from one cultural setting or group to another. Norms that change with travel are often easily identified, as I experienced recently in training for and “running” (slowly jogging) a marathon. I trained by running around my quiet neighborhood, and each day I ran alone, down roads on which cars and trucks and not runners prevailed. In such a culture, I perceived that I was not the norm.

When I got to Philadelphia on race day, however, there were 20,000 runners and we were all together. Suddenly running long distances *was* the norm—boom, just like that. Sometimes I imagine moving to a culture where an hour-long afternoon siesta is the norm, and that is another norm shift I would quickly recognize and embrace.

Other norms change over time, like the norm for “entertainment” via televised performances by popular singers. The norm during Elvis’ time was vastly different from the current norm, but this change was not something that happened overnight. Think also of the civil rights movement—the recognition of rights for women, African-Americans, and others—which began generations ago and yet continues today. Or the standard for church attire, especially in the Mennonite church in North

America. Or portion sizes of food provided by restaurants.

What scares me about these norms that change over time is how they tend not to be “in your face” and thus are not always easily detected.

They slip in slowly and subtly. Then the shift itself is so gradual that distinguishing whether it is good or bad proves a complicated task, and the change is often not shocking enough for us to act for or against it.

And, subtly as these shifts occur, when do they stop? If, in fifty years, we

went from Elvis to Adam Lambert, what could we arrive at in another fifty years with an equally drastic progression? Or should we trust that these things will not progress linearly, but rather ebb and flow, like the tide and economic stability?

On the one hand I scoff and say, “Oh please, I wouldn’t know a thing about this Lambert guy if it weren’t for the news article I read that compelled me to find his video.” But on the other hand, this is out there for the world to see, and we find comfort in our own lives when we see that which we’re not sure is “okay” happening in the lives of others. So also, we are unsettled and sometimes swayed when what we thought was *not* okay seems to be the norm for everyone else.

When I as a teacher made the drastic jump from preschool to high school, I found myself cringing at the language I heard among my new, elder students, my norm having been

What scares me about these norms that change over time is how they tend not to be “in your face” and thus are not always easily detected.

changed at an abnormal speed. At the preschool level, we had discouraged children from using “potty language” out of context, or, in extreme cases, from using the word *stupid*.

Recognizing that I might be overly sensitive and overwhelmed by what I perceived as a prevalence of profanity, I wondered if I might have to bend a little to the norm and tolerate more from these students nearing adulthood. After all, it seems the norm for families to work harder to keep young children from being exposed to swear words in the home and on TV. Then as children turn into teenagers and young adults, many families seem to ease up on the sheltering, allowing the lessening of censorship to occur gradually and rather painlessly as a natural transition into adulthood.

I shared these musings with a wise colleague, known for his behavior-and-discipline expertise, who bluntly told me, “No. If you have a problem with the language, you make it known, and stick by it. That’s the only way it will change. Just because it seems to be normal doesn’t mean you need to change *your* ways.” And in that particular case I think such zero-tolerance language rings true.

Norms are bred by whatever cultural values speak most loudly. If we do not hear our values represented in

the norms, we ought to count the cost of living quietly on the fringes, unheard. When I look at that Presley and Lambert example of what has been acceptable in a musical performance, I see the cultural value of sexual expression and freedom speaking more loudly than purity. When I look at the civil rights movement I see equality speaking more loudly than

tradition. When I teach in a classroom today, I hope that respect speaks more loudly than profanity.

To borrow a phrase from National Public Radio, *this I believe*—that we might all benefit from a careful look at the cultural groups of which we are a part and a reevaluation of the “norms” established within those groups.

I dare not suggest we rally together and protest “simulated sex” dancing during awards shows, because I myself would rather just not turn on the TV. But I do hope we ask these questions in our churches, our families, our workplaces, our groups of friends: What are our most important cultural values? Are they currently reflected in the norm as we know it? If not, perhaps a proverbial Elvis hip-swivel is in order.

—*Renee Gehman, Souderton, Pennsylvania, is assistant editor, Dream-Seeker Magazine; teacher; and a seeker of appropriate norms.*

What are our most important cultural values? Are they currently reflected in the norm as we know it? If not, perhaps a proverbial Elvis hip-swivel is in order.

Altar Call

Tim Stair

It’s been awhile since I’ve been in a church service when an altar call is given. Considering Pastor Daryl’s black Pentecostal style and that it’s a warm night where we are, just outside New Orleans and inside the yellow stucco of Salvation Church, I confess my radar perks up. I’ve seen this stuff done so badly and people exploited. I like Pastor Daryl. I want to trust him, but between the Pentecostal style and the altar call my internal yellow caution lights are flashing question marks in my heart and mind.

Pastor Daryl launches into the invitation.

Now I don’t want a dead church,
but I also don’t want to just play church.
You know what I mean. (Yes. Yes. Preach it Pastor.)
The kind where they come and get all excited (Yes.
Amen.),
but afterwards, when they walk out those doors,
(My, my)
they’re back to playin’ around just like they’ve always played around, (That’s right!)
and they were just playin’ church too. (Yes, Lord.)
Now, I am not interested in that kind of church and
I don’t think God is either. (Amen. Amen.)
But if you want a new walk with God (Yes.)



and don't want to just be playin' at it (Yes, that's it.), then I invite you to come up here and not hold back. (Amen. Preach it now.).

The song leader, Pastor Daryl, and the choir launch into "Can't Nobody Do Me Like Jesus," Jesus their friend, Jesus their Lord who woke them and told them to "run on."

Two women have come forward during the singing. The first is sturdy, vibrant and young, probably not more than eighteen or nineteen. The second is older, I would guess approaching forty, but she could be younger or older. What is clear to me is that she's likely seen more than you would wish on someone. Who knows what it's been, but it's marked her—her posture, her countenance, her eyes.

She's left four children back in the pew to come up here. Some of the church sisters quietly move into place to oversee them if needed. They look to range in ages from two or three to eleven or twelve. It's hard to know if they are her children or grandbabies she's helping to raise.

The first young woman has been joined by another from the choir, clearly a friend, who has placed an arm around her and is quietly praying with her. Pastor Daryl approaches them and speaks with them quietly. The young woman speaks with him, indicating she wants to know God better, learn to follow Jesus and be

The young woman speaks with him, indicating she wants to know God better, learn to follow Jesus and be baptized.

baptized. He tells her to talk with Sister Louise, his wife, and they'll set an appointment to see her together. He quietly prays with her and thanks her for her courage. So far, so good.

He approaches the older woman who is kneeling. He lightly touches her elbow and helps her rise to her feet. He still has his microphone on; I can see the red light. He speaks to her, gently.

"What did you come forward for, Sister? You were up here last Sunday, weren't you?"

"Yes, I just need a closer walk with God."

Pastor Daryl smiles kindly.

"I can appreciate that, we all need that."

He turns with her now to the whole congregation which, understand, is about fifty to sixty people, but he keeps his eyes focused on hers.

"Now, Sister, I want to tell you something, but it is something we all need to hear."

My internal caution lights are flashing but not too rapidly.

"You don't need to come back up to the altar every time you feel you need a closer walk with God. None of us need to. You, and all of us, just need to keep coming together, staying in the Word together and walking with each other. And Sister, you keep coming and I promise we will keep walking with you, whatever you are going through. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

He is standing tall now as he asks her this question. And somehow, she

is standing taller too. She smiles and says a firm "Yes. Thank you, Pastor."

Whatever he has done and however he has done it, she walks back to her seat with her head held higher and a touch more lightness in her step. I have my answer. I notice my internal caution lights have stopped flashing.

—Tim Stair, Goshen, Indiana, is pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing from Murray State University. He is also a consultant with Mennonite

Health Services Alliance. Until the end of 2008 he had been Minister of Calling and Outreach at College Mennonite Church. "The Altar Call" is part of Salvation's Storm, a larger piece Stair is working on regarding the experience of Salvation Church in Pearl River, Louisiana following Hurricane Katrina. Through a set of existing friendships, College Mennonite Church formed a relationship with this congregation after the storm.



A Less-Than-Perfect Morning

Deborah Good

About thirty minutes ago, my doorbell rang. Good friends who live next door were stopping by to drop off their baby monitor before heading out for the evening. The baby monitor now sitting on the table beside me is a small speaker that receives a signal from the room where my friends' two-year-old son is sleeping. Because our houses are attached, the monitor's transmission passes through the wall we share, and if little Jacob so much as hiccups, I can hear it loud and clear.

I am sitting on a dining room chair from friends I used to live with, at a table on loan from my older brother and sister-in-law who live in the apartment below me. My housemate is borrowing my car for the evening. And I am listening to music another friend gave me on a mix CD last year.

In big and small ways, the people I know are taking care of me, and I of them. We lend each other whatever resources and expertise we may have. A sociologist might call this "social capital" and a psychologist, "interdependence." I recently called it my "security blanket." The people-web that surrounds me day to day is what makes me feel safe and okay.

Interdependence is a lifestyle I try to cultivate. Sometimes my attempts go smoothly. Other times they look a little less perfect, like this:

Several years ago, I was living with three good friends—Julie, Melody, and Christina—on Hazel Avenue in West Philadelphia. Their names will help you follow the story I am about to tell.

The four of us shared many things: food, chores, clothing, and the personal details of our lives. We also borrowed cars from one another. Because the city offered us biking, walking, and public transportation options, two cars for four people served us just fine.

It was Friday and I was off work for the day. Having just returned from breakfast with a friend, I stood on our porch listening to a long and apologetic cell phone message from Christina. She explained that she and Julie had left my car parked illegally at 38th and Spruce Streets because my muffler seemed to be dragging on the ground. Since they had both needed to rush to work, they'd left a hand-scrawled note on the windshield to deter the notorious Philadelphia Parking Authority.

(I should add that the dragging muffler was not altogether surprising, as my car at the time was a twenty-year-old maroon Honda Accord, belonging to my parents. It was a bit rough around the edges and within the year, my parents and I sold it for

450 whopping dollars to someone who responded to the ad I'd placed on craigslist.org. He was moving from New York City to D.C. to be the mascot for the Washington Nationals. I am serious. But that is another story.)

I put down my cell phone to think about next steps. Only later did I learn the sequence of events that led to Christina's message.

Friday morning was chilly—cold in fact. I had already left on foot for my breakfast plans and Melody had biked in for her early shift as a nurse at a local hospital. Christina and Julie

were at home, getting ready to leave for their respective jobs.

Julie planned to use Melody's car for the day and decided to warm up the engine about five minutes before she was ready to go. She started the car and then locked the doors with the engine running, so no one would make off with the car, and assumed the automatic key chain in her hands would get her back in when it was time to hit the road.

Unfortunately, she was mistaken.

With its engine running, Melody's car would not allow Julie to use the automatic key chain to unlock the doors. She could not get in. She could not leave for work. And the car was locked with the engine running.

Incredulous, Julie rushed inside to search Melody's drawers for another key. No luck. When she called the hospital, she learned Melody had an

She started the car and then locked the doors with the engine running . . . and assumed the automatic key chain in her hands would get her back in. . . . Unfortunately, she was mistaken.

extra key with her there. Julie would have to get it from her.

A plan began to form. Julie would drive my car to the hospital with Christina. Christina would wait in the car while Julie ran inside for the key. Christina would then catch the trolley to her job downtown while Julie drove back to Melody's running car and get started with her day as though nothing had stopped her. It was a good plan.

Three-quarters of the way to the hospital Christina and Julie heard an awful metal-on-pavement scraping sound. (For those of you who like to talk car parts: Apparently the exhaust system in my car had rusted out at the catalytic converter, and the front end of the muffler had dropped to the ground.) This is when they ditched my car and tucked their note under one wiper.

Meanwhile, Melody's car was still sitting on Hazel Avenue, running.

Julie took off sprinting to the hospital, got the key from Melody, hopped on the trolley back home to Hazel Avenue, and *finally* gained entry to Melody's car. Christina walked to the nearest trolley stop and headed to work.

By the time I arrived home from breakfast, oblivious to the whole ordeal, the others were safely at work or on their way. Only one problem remained unsolved: What was I to do with my illegally parked car?

Some say that asking for help is hard to do, but it does not have to be. I regularly lean on the people I know—my well-loved and slightly ragged security blanket.

A tow truck is always an option, but I opted to once again rely on the people I know. I have an internal rolodex I use when I need help. When I recently needed advice on my resume, I asked my friend, Wanda. When I was cooking and didn't know what to substitute for buttermilk, Ben got the call. In this case, I called Blunk, who often went by his last name. He was generally good at problem-solving. "I'll come pick you up in about half an hour," he told me. "Bring a garden hose."

A hose?

I did as I was told. When Blunk, my garden hose, and I arrived at my 1985 Honda, I was relieved that Christina and Julie's note had worked: the car was ticket-free. Blunk and I ran the hose around the entire body of the car, under the exhaust system, and through the two back-passenger windows. Blunk sat in the back seat, pulling gently on both ends of the hose, to hold up the falling-down muffler while I hopped in the front seat and eased my way to the nearest Midas, without a scrape.

Some say that asking for help is hard to do, but it does not have to be. I regularly lean on the people I know—my well-loved and slightly ragged security blanket.

I recently heard a man interviewed on the radio who was shrinking away from friends while unemployed: "I just want to get

through this on my own," he told the reporter. I wanted to tell him that he was wrong, that our lives can and should be small protests against the loud voices of independence and self-sufficiency.

I wanted to tell him my story of how five friends, two cars, and a garden hose made it through a less-than-perfect morning, and how none of us did it on our own.

—*Deborah Good, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, is a research assistant at Research for Action (www.researchforaction.org) and author, with Nelson Good, of Long After I'm Gone: A Father-Daughter Memoir (DreamSeeker Books imprint of Cascadia Publishing House, 2009). She can be reached at deborahagood@gmail.com.*



Fragile Passages of Sainthood

Alan Soffin

Some say saints have walked the earth. I doubt it. I see centaurs. Half-horse half-“man,” or, nowadays, “half-person.” The human cannot shake the interest of the animal from which life proximately comes. We live a conflict of interest, fated never to be sure—“Did I do it for myself or something greater?”

One must see transcendence in others, if at all. Even then, it is a momentary thing. Let me tell you how I saw it, evanescent as heat lightning at my mother’s burial.

I have to say my mother was a narcissist (I come by my centaur half “honestly”). She was also prejudiced, racially. (Thank goodness, I have that other half.) But, heading into her mid-90s, she needed 24-hour help. And so, due to the funds she had by luck and frugality amassed, she was able to hire a live-in. Black, of course. (Tell me irony is not the law of life.) Women from Africa and the Caribbean. They came and went; narcissism makes cold comfort.

Of course my mother was herself a victim, as we all are, of things beside our centaur half. An immigrant who never went to high school, a survivor in a social jungle whose better side lay in dreams of ideality and

memories of Founding Fathers. And so, there she was at the end, wheelchair-bound, in a small house, surviving in the only way she could, with people paid to help (not religiously, unless God is a behaviorist).

Then it came. A coma; brief, painless. She died, attended by a black woman and by the antiques she had for years acquired with an artist’s eye.

My mother and this helper had been together for over a year. The woman was tough. She had her own story, one that, in time, proved stronger than my mother’s.

So, despite my mother’s complaints and absurd accusations, her dominance was partly eclipsed. They cohabited loudly. The helper had a sister, also strong, who, from time to time took over, while my mother’s paid companion recharged elsewhere. That made two black helpers, two assaults upon a prejudice that now had lost its voice but could never lose its past.

Of course, the helpers knew my mother’s prejudice. Yet, as they happened also to be human, attachments emerged, as plants grow out from rock.

It was a long drive to the cemetery on Long Island. The retinue was next to non-existent: my wife and I, and in the back seat, two middle-aged black women. We had warned them that the drive was long and that they cer-

tainly needn’t come. They knew there was no money for their presence. That was over.

Through tears that came suddenly and surprisingly, I saw two heavy, dark-skinned women, standing motionless as dirt trickled down into the grave. Why were they there? There was nothing in it for them. . . .

The graveyard had a barren aspect—flat, a few trees, nondescript stones, and an office made hard by glass and the odor of receipts. We followed the hearse that carried my mother an obligatory several hundred feet from the building to the spot where my father and sister were buried. The years of my boyhood lay in the box that was

drawn from the vehicle.

As workers tilted the boards down which her simple coffin slid, my mother passed into the earth, attended by her son, his wife, but no one else of personal or blood acquaintance.

Through tears that came suddenly and surprisingly, I saw two heavy, dark-skinned women, standing motionless as dirt trickled down into the grave. Why were they there? There was nothing in it for them, these people she had disparaged for so many years and yet without whom she would have suffered grievously. The acid of her ignorance was something they knew, as all “minorities” know.

My wife and I had stepped away. They, however, did not. Perhaps it was their tears, to me far more surprising than my own; perhaps it was their silhouettes so still against the sky. Perhaps it was their offering of unearned homage.

I had no illusions about their lives (as, painfully, I have fewer and fewer about my own). Yet their vigil had the dignity of sculptured figures that in cemeteries everywhere stand guard over the dead.

Later, I thought perhaps there were that day, if not saints, then fragile passages of sainthood—much as on a cloudy day the sun will, very briefly, illuminate a person or a tree and, pass-

ing on, leave them once again in shadow.

—Alan Soffin, *Doylestown, Pennsylvania, numbers among his interests philosophy, religion, filmmaking, writing, and music ranging from classical through jazz and international sounds. Soffin is awaiting publication of Rethinking Religion (Cascadia, 2010).*

To God, If You're Listening

Just want you to know you're welcome here—
one can never have too many friends.
If you're the soul mate some say you are,
rest assured you'll be met with open arms.

But don't expect me to conjure you
from ancient texts or wishful thinking
or take some preacher's word for it.
You'll have to be more assertive than that.

No need to come with promises, either,
of mansions or immortality.
A simple presence,
a heartfelt hug,
will do.

—Dale Bicksler, *Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, is retired from a career in information technology. He maintains a website of his photographs and poetry at www.druther-sndragons.com.*

Mermaid Seeking Voice

Rachel Moore-Beitler

The tale of the twenty-something: entering the waters head first with a brave dive, coming up gasping for air, treading water, searching for land, swimming, maybe even laughing, treading more water, fighting the current, or sometimes getting out and questioning the flow altogether.

I am presently finding harbor in Boulder, Colorado, where I can access just about everything by bike or bus, (usually) find the organic food I want, hang homemade prayer flags on my front porch, and choose from stores that offer handmade, fair-trade goods—all with the foothills of the Flatirons Mountains in the distance. A bohemian island paradise? Not quite.

Turns out, it's incredibly tiresome to job hunt in an oversaturated sea of over-qualified post-grads and lots of well-intentioned-do-gooders. How does my resume hold water? How can my voice be heard? Moreover, how does a waitressing gal like me stay afloat in the waters of the financially privileged?

This city ends up being an interesting place for treasure hunting, which for me looks like searching for affordable organic produce and body work on a

sliding scale. The repeated diving and resurfacing. Sure, yoga classes and solar panels are amazing components to a mindful, green lifestyle, but they are unaffordable to the many loan-carrying, post-college, and pre-settled young adults like myself.

So why do I care? Perhaps its my international travels or year-long experiences volunteering at a homeless shelter that have instilled a constant curiosity about (lack of) money and access while bobbing in the sea of capitalism. How to be committed to conscious consuming while feeling overwhelmed by the monotonous rush of the “more is more” mainstream.

The lived juxtaposition: happily toting my compost bin to the curbside city-wide pickup one minute; counting tips for grocery trips to buy fresh, hopefully local, and non-high-fructose-corn-syrup-containing food the next (harder than you might think!).

How can we as a society start making healthy, sustainable lifestyles more prevalent and accessible to lower income, marginalized individuals, families, neighborhoods, and communities? How do I eat non-GMO food (i.e. the more expensive brand) while living paycheck to paycheck?

And suddenly I find myself caught in the currents of Environmental Justice. Allow me to step on my (earth-friendly) soapbox for a second and highlight the work of Van Jones, an

How do I eat non-GMO food (i.e. the more expensive brand) while living paycheck to paycheck?

activist, environmental justice pioneer, and author of *The Green Collar Economy: How One Solution Can Fix Our Two Biggest Problems* (HarperOne, 2008). Um, yes please?! Essentially, Jones is a voice finally offering

practical ways simultaneously to rescue the flailing economy and devastated environment. He sparks the much-needed conversation about the importance of Environmental Justice, that is, how to interrupt our addiction to oil, and in doing so, pay more attention to disrupted neighborhoods and displaced indigenous communities. A mouthful for many, but I believe that this guy is on to something.

Suddenly, going green is the new fad—haven’t you heard Whole Foods called “whole paycheck”? No wonder Jones shows how this wave of eco-chic creates an illusory, elitist notion about those privileged enough to focus on environmental concerns; while we certainly need people to be thinking about the rainforest, we also need people to be thinking about their communities.

Jones speaks to how teaching green technology (such as how to install solar panels) can not only boost the economy but provide many with a path out of poverty—oh, and save the world. I am humbled in my efforts to relay his message; please, run, don’t walk, to get your hands on a copy of this book. (www.greenforall.org)

So how do I go green in my (sub)urban community? Big dreams, small strokes. Planting seeds in the

lawn of my rental house, driving on biodiesel, cultivating a consciousness on consumption/minimizing waste, and maintaining a dedication to healthy diet.

And why? Because once we’ve learned the disastrous effects of our trampling, how can we not pause to think about our footprint?

Even so, it’s not easy being a conscious consumer (stopping to read the ingredient list, considering where and how things were packed/shipped, looking for earth-friendly paper products, wondering where/how clothes were made), while also being financially strapped. Often I feel like a frustrated, small fish in a big pond of economic privilege. Especially when it just seems so obvious that if we all made like salmon and started swimming upstream (challenging corporations that have destructive business practices), we could make waves.

Gosh, do I sound jaded? Pulled down by the undertow? Tired of waiting? I would like to think that amid all of this puddle-jumping, I am still able to recognize that everyone is simply trying to do the best they know how to achieve happiness.

Yet if that means season lift-tickets, I find myself confronting a swell of disappointment. Why can’t life be more like the scene at the end of *Finding Nemo* where he gets all the fish stuck in the fisherman’s net to swim down together to be free? How do you convince others to swim away? (How

do you convince them that they are stuck in the net in the first place?) Herein lies the struggle, first in finding my voice and then in finding the where and when to speak.

So what is the idyllic vision beyond Boulder? For now it only exists as a muddled watercolor with splashes of gardens that feed a household of adopted children being raised without the overstimulation of television or caffeinated sodas, with a focus on community and connection through music instead of alcohol; where conversations spill over with shared awareness about difference and there is celebration for eco-friendly alternatives, diversity, volunteerism, and social justice.

Until the bubble bursts and I find myself discouraged to wonder where the funding for such a homestead will come from. (Are the twenties the part of your life where you just question everything?) Still, where is land that offers the accessible, affordable, and fertile ground in which to plant and water these seeds of hope? I know there are others seeking voice, eager for change. Perhaps for now it’s like Nemo’s friend says, “Just keep swimming, just keep swimming.”

—Rachel Moore-Beitler, Boulder, Colorado, is currently enjoying a lovely change of scene working for a local preschool. Eating farmer’s market produce, composing songs while biking, and playing with her dog keep her content.



Speaking of Heaven

*A Review of Heaven:
The Logic of Eternal Joy*

Daniel Hertzler

Heaven: The Logic of Eternal Joy, by Jerry L. Walls. Oxford University Press, 2002.

How can one write about heaven never having been there? As a one-time reporter, my concern was to recall and report what I saw and heard. To operate without such data calls for some different tactics.

Heaven: The Logic of Eternal Joy is an exercise in speculative philosophy. It does not draw heavily from the Bible. Part of the trouble may be that while the Bible has repeated references to heaven, these often mean the sky. Otherwise they tend toward the visionary such as Isaiah 6 or apocalyptic as in Revelation 21, where it is unclear whether the reference is to future bliss or present reality.

One exception is Psalm 33:13, where “The Lord looks down from heaven / he sees all humankind.” Is this in back of the popular folk theology which has the deceased up above looking down at those left behind? I’m amazed at how often I hear this.

The 1950s four-volume *Mennonite Encyclopedia* (Mennonite Publishing House) has no article on heaven, but the newer volume 5 (Herald Press, 1990)

has a brief article by Stanley C. Shenk. It observes that “Because of symbolic language and interpretation problems, the biblical doctrine of heaven is somewhat elusive.” However, “Many concepts and images appear in the Bible in regards to the final destiny of God’s people.”

The entry concludes with a quotation from Paul Erb in his book *The Alpha and the Omega* (Herald Press, 1955): “The Christian has something beyond. He has Someone there, Someone he knows. He has a Lord and Saviour in heaven, who has given him life and hope” (153 in Erb, 368 in vol. 5).

To produce 200 pages on heaven, Walls has gone well beyond the Bible. He begins by observing that some persons have discarded the concept of heaven. Among these are radical theologians Gordon Kaufman and Rosemary Radford Ruether. The former considers symbols such as last judgment, heaven, and hell no longer relevant; the latter “wonders whether the whole notion of life after death is even a concern for women” (4).

Although Walls observes that “there are abundant signs that Kaufman was dead wrong when he pronounced that there is no future for heaven and hell” (12) he does not appear to engage Kaufman and Ruether in dialogue. He concerns himself with naturalistic philosophers more than with theologians.

Walls indicates that he will be “engaging a cluster of questions that

range across theology, metaphysics, epistemology, and moral philosophy. I will operate primarily as a philosopher of religion in addressing these issues, but at points I will be concerned with scriptural exegesis and historical theology” (13).

“Because of symbolic language and interpretation problems, the biblical doctrine of heaven is somewhat elusive.”

This approach appears to fit with his position as Professor of Philosophy of Religion at Asbury Theological Seminary. He takes his stand on the traditional doctrines of the church and indicates that his belief in heaven is integral to “those doctrines that are most distinctly Christian, namely the doctrines of the Trinity, incarnation, atonement, resurrection, and the second coming of Christ.”

Among these he finds the doctrine of resurrection foundational. “Because Jesus was raised from the dead, we hope to be also, in a body like his resurrected body. If the resurrection is undercut, the basis of this hope is undercut” (32).

Having thus made his stand early, we will have a general idea where Walls will go, but an occasional proposal strikes me as novel. Not surprising is his critique of David Hume in chapter 1. Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* did not deny the existence of God but did deny God’s goodness in light of “the fact of evil in our world” (17). Walls argues that “Hume should either have denied God’s existence or accepted his goodness. His alternative proposal that the Creator of our universe is amoral is

deeply incoherent” (29).

Of major concern to Walls are the questions of salvation and sanctification. If we are saved by faith, how are we to be sanctified and worthy of heaven? After a wide-ranging discussion of atonement and sanctification, he comes out in favor of Purgatory, that there will be an opportunity after death to deal with issues not faced in this life. “Purgatory means coming to terms fully with reality” (60). Well.

Next is the question of who will get to heaven, “the relationship between Christianity and other religions” (63). He identifies three positions: particularism, pluralism, and inclusivism. “Particularism poses an insurmountable moral problem for the doctrine of heaven because it depicts God as less than perfectly loving” (75). As for pluralism, Walls discusses the position of Hick, who finds all of the world’s religions similar in their basis of salvation, with none being superior to the other. He finds this position “altogether unacceptable for anyone who takes seriously anything like a traditional view of heaven” (79).

Instead Walls favors inclusivism which, he says, “is prepared to acknowledge a measure of common ground between Christianity and other religions” (80). After jousting with Hick on the issue, he concludes that “there is no reason why God could not give all persons an equal opportunity for salvation” (85).

At the end of the chapter is a brief discussion of the positive fate of children who have not had an opportunity to articulate their faith and even a comment on the status of the animals.

“Since all things find their telos [purpose] in God, it is not unreasonable to include animals in our hopes and to believe they will be included to the degree they are capable, in the fellowship of the redeemed” (91).

Next is a question of personal identity, and he affirms that “we will know each other truly and completely for the first time” (112). As for the problem of evil, he concludes that “Heaven holds out the promise that persons who have suffered in terrible ways and died premature deaths . . . have not been consigned to oblivion” (130).

Chapter 6 is an extensive discussion of near-death experiences (NDEs). The question, of course, is whether these people have been in touch with a celestial reality or whether these experiences can be explained from a naturalistic standpoint. Wells concludes that “unless and until the naturalistic account of NDEs is proven to be true, they deserve serious consideration as positive evidence for the Christian doctrine of heaven” (160).

The final chapter is entitled “Heaven, Morality and the Meaning of Life” where Walls holds that “naturalistic views of reality undermine both morality and meaning. . . .

“By contrast with naturalism, I shall show how orthodox Christian faith, particularly in its doctrine of heaven, both underwrites morality and charges our lives with depth of meaning” (162). Among those reviewed critically with help from one George Mavrodes is Bertrand Russell, for whom “The truly deep things in a

Russellian world are things such as matter, energy, natural law, even change or chaos.” Walls responds, “It is hard to see how morality can make overriding demands on us if it is superficial in this sense.”

Another view is that of Kant, who sought to call for morality without belief in God. Again with Mavrodes, Walls concludes that “we must postulate God and immortality to insure this ultimate correspondence” (165).

Walls finds that in some cases naturalistic philosophers have developed what he terms a secular substitute for the meaning of life. Five different options are described, the fifth of which is “the continuing influence and impact of a life well lived.” As an example of this, he mentions Carl Sagan, a famous scientist who died while denying the possibility of life after death, but whose life nevertheless influenced many persons (183).

Walls concludes that “The fact that naturalists offer secular alternatives to heaven . . . shows that it is an irreplaceable resource in our efforts to give our lives the meaning we crave” (185). So he describes how the Christian doctrine of heaven answers questions the naturalists cannot answer.

He observes that “In Christian thought, resurrection and immortality are not afterthoughts, nor are they postulates to salvage morality from irrationality. They are integral to the grand claim that ultimate reality is reciprocal love” (191). Further, “Per-

haps at the end of the day, the issues come down to whether we can believe in God, for the Christian view of God is that he is a being whose very nature is to be ecstatically happy” (197).

After this survey, I find myself yet inclined toward the more cautious Mennonite perspective on heaven.

After this survey, I find myself yet inclined toward the more cautious Mennonite perspective on heaven.

We do believe in God, although the idea of God as “ecstatically happy” is a new thought to me. I am reminded also that in Matthew 28:17 it is reported that when the 11 disciples saw Jesus after his resurrection, “some doubted.” Questions about things celestial are not new.

However, we do have martyrs in the Mennonite tradition, and martyrs had a perspective on life after death. The article “Martyrs” in *Mennonite Encyclopedia* (vol. 3, p. 524), reports that “The martyrs had the unshakable certainty of being on the right road, which God had unequivocally showed them in the Scriptures. . . . During their persecution they had learned that this life cannot be the final fulfillment. Hence they saw even in a martyr’s death the transition to a fuller and richer life.”

The 1995 *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* indulges in little speculation, generally sticking close to the Bible. “We look forward to the coming of a new earth and a new Jerusalem” it states in Article 24, “The Reign of God” and continues, “where the people of God will no longer hunger, thirst or cry” (90).

Article 24 includes the commentary that “The New Testament says much about the resurrection. It speaks much less frequently about the state of persons between the time of their death and the resurrection. Yet we who are in Christ are assured that not even death can separate us from the love of God (Rom. 8:38-39)” (91).

Mennonites will tend to agree with Walls that “the issue comes down to whether we can believe in God,” but beyond this will hesitate to make emphatic statements. Yet with the prevalence of the popular piety where the dead are perceived as looking down, perhaps we should have a perspective on death and resurrection. In *The Christian Century*, July 14, 2009, Michael Jinkins published “Legacy of

Faith,” written as a letter to his daughter who was struggling with the question “Is there a God?” Jinkins states, “You have asked me on a couple of occasions if I believe in the resurrection. I have answered you by placing myself in the hands of the oldest creed in Christendom, the Nicene Creed: ‘I look for the resurrection.’” (35).

It occurs to me that “look for” suggests a proper attitude. The mystery is acknowledged, the questions are not answered, but a position is taken. In the meantime, we wait to see what will happen.

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



Healed

Noël R. King

Eileen wondered if she had been healed.

“Hallelujah!” she shouted dramatically, just to see how it felt.

Ouch.

“I am NOT healed!” she shouted, louder still.

“That feels much more true,” she thought sadly to herself.

She could no longer remember now what it was that needed to be healed. Her mind, perhaps?

Saints above! How in the world had she ever allowed herself to get to this point—her thoughts so stuffed with fog and woe?

Well, she didn’t know, but at least there was just enough room in there to let a bowling thought sneak through beside her tight, gray other thoughts.

Yes! That is what she’d do.

A good long game of bowling always made her feel marvy, really on top of the world, and she could surely use that kind of feeling right about now.

Post-haste, she called her friend Martha, and off they went.

“This is more like it,” she said, once they got their bowling shoes on.

“What?” said Martha.

“I said, ‘This is more like it,’” she said.

“Oh,” said Martha.

All went well then until about round three, when Eileen’s finger started to hurt and all her anxious thoughts came crashing back again.

Except . . .

“Maybe my finger used to be broken, and now it’s healed!” she exclaimed with renewed hope to Martha, who stared at her blankly.

“Huh?” said Martha.

“Oh, never mind,” said Eileen. “I think I am going to bowl a strike this time.”

And she did.

—*As circumstances warrant, through her Turquoise Pen column Noël R. King, Scottsville, Virginia, reports on strange and wonderful or worrisome things, including whether fingers are healed.*

A Job Made in Heaven

“Holy benefit of the doubt,” exclaims

Robin

as believers in an almighty God
give him credit for everything good
and nothing bad.

—*Dale Bicksler, Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, works in the IT department of a Harrisburg insurance company.*

Keeping Going Through Mud

Michael A. King

On the New Mexico map the road has a route number and looks official enough, though marked as having 25 miles of gravel surface. Going that way will save 60 miles. When I get to the gravel part, it looks fine. I want to save 60 miles.

Nearly halfway. No big deal. Then aftermath of thunderstorms. Then snow. Colder and colder as the road climbs. Slick road. Slicker. Now driver door instead of front end is facing front. Road becomes mud five inches down. Either move about two miles an hour or sideways or visit the ditch. But go too slow and stall. Still 15 miles to go. Car whines back and forth in ruts, throwing mud, slipping, veering. My foot shakes from tension and holding it barely on the gas pedal. I feel I may be in trouble.

I want to panic. But I’m up in the mountains. No one nearby. And if someone does turn up, it may not be a good someone. I am in a bad spot.

A snatch of a verse comes into my head. I’m not sure from where. I think from a psalm but I can’t say that at the moment chapter and verse seem essential. And I’m not sure what version I’m remembering in,

but I decide God may not care. This is what I hear: “The Lord preserves your going out and your coming in.” The phrase takes over my entire mind. I decide I have no choice but to trust the words and, unless I just can’t, to keep going even at inches an hour.

I become nothing but a piece of scared meat hunched over a steering wheel guided by a mind with nothing in it but “Keep going” and “The Lord preserves your going out and your coming in.” On and on and on. “Keep going. The Lord preserves your going out and your coming in. Keep going. The Lord preserves your going out and your coming in.”

Two and a half hours later, good road.

Has the Lord preserved my going out and my coming in? Unclear, as these things so often are. In the most obvious sense, no. Not the Lord but I preserved my going out and my coming in. Terrified as I was, still I was who chose the speed and the angle of the wheel and which ruts to try to stay in.

Probably any given day around the world, people don’t make it through such circumstances. Did God then fail to preserve their goings out and their comings in? I hate to think so. I’ve never been a fan of saying well we know this miracle is God’s preservation because then how do we

not also insist that tragedy is God’s lack of preservation?

Still I suspect my experience says something about God. I suspect it illustrates that when in terror we leap for a primal lifeline, it is more there for us than if we don’t. I truly was so frightened that I could barely think straight, my body so shaken I could barely steer. If I had not clung to my “The Lord preserves” lifeline, maybe I’d have limped into town alive anyway. And maybe not.

This I’d guess is often, if we’re honest, the way it really is with faith. We don’t know for sure how God is present—or not—at the other end of the line. We only know that we got here clinging to the line. Better to have clung and lost, I suspect—and surely better to have clung and won!—than never to have clung at all.

My family can testify that I don’t test God any more by driving on dirt roads through mud. But if I ever find myself similarly fearing for my very life, I will be quick to cling once more to the Lord who preserves “thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and for evermore,” as I now know Psalm 121 (ASV) does put it.

—*Michael A. King, Telford, Pennsylvania, is publisher, Cascadia Publishing House LLC; editor, DreamSeeker Magazine; and a pastor and speaker.*

**I become nothing
but a piece of
scared meat
hunched over a
steering wheel
guided by a mind
with nothing in it
but “Keep going”
and “The Lord
preserves. . .**

To Dad

Dad,
You slipped away so suddenly
We didn’t get a chance to say good-bye
We wanted to tell you how much we appreciated you
How much we loved your quiet and reassuring ways,
Your thoughtful analysis of current politics
Your ability to see through the issues of the church
Your anticipation and excitement on the golf course
And your listening ear and humble assurance of wisdom

You often were quiet and distant at our house when you came to visit

We didn’t always do or say things that pleased you, but we know, Dad,

Rest easy, we know—

We know that you loved and appreciated us, and wish you’d said it more.

We know that if it had been up to you, you would not have missed any of your grandchildren’s graduations.

We know that you didn’t want us to worry about money but to enjoy life,

We know that you wouldn’t want us to make a fuss over your death,

We know that you would want us to live a life of faithfulness to God by serving others.

We know that you would want us to remember your smile, your reassurance, your caring comfort, and above all, your undying love

So go and find rest with your heavenly father on the lushest, greenest golf course—you were a good and faithful servant.

—*Beverly Miller, Harleysville, Pennsylvania, is a free-lance medical editor. Her poem emerged from the shock of losing her father-in-law Paul Miller on April 22, 2009. He was a man of quiet integrity and humble generosity.*





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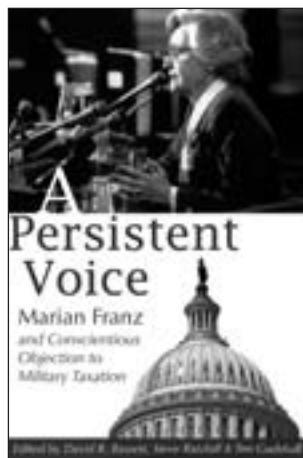
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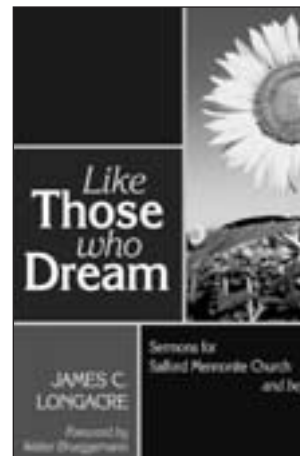
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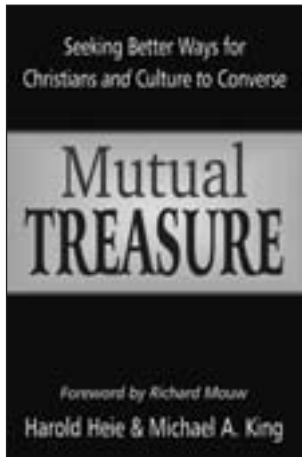
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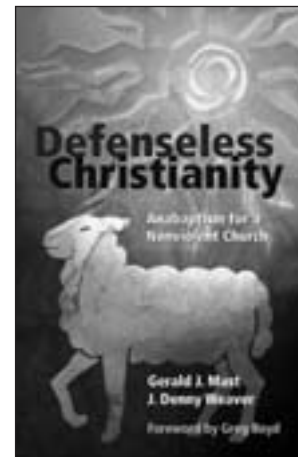


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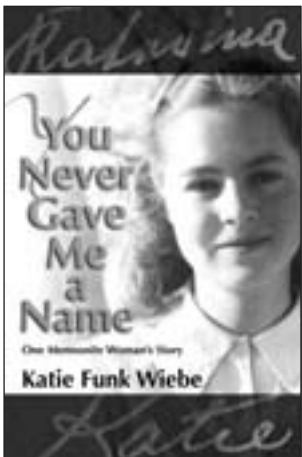
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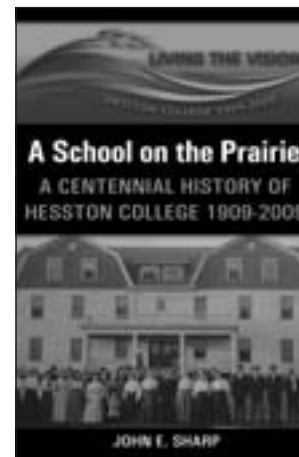
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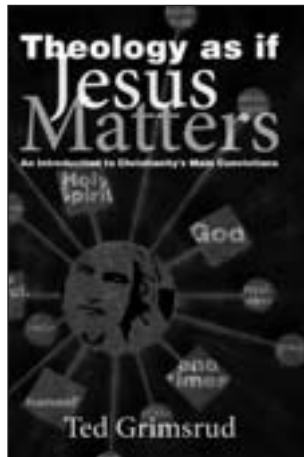
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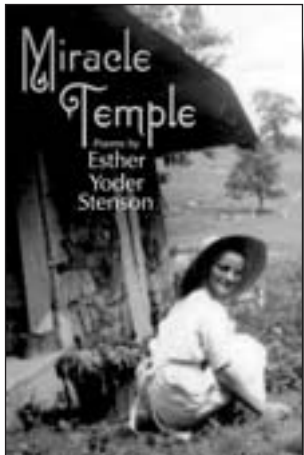
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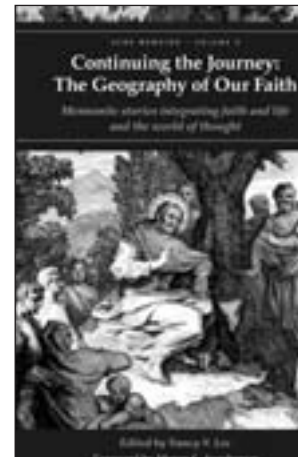
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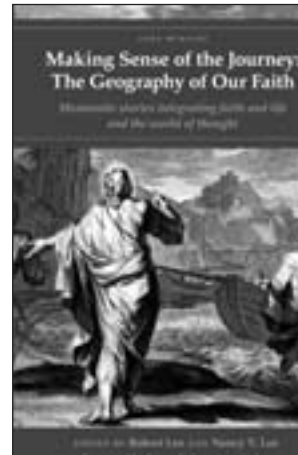
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Dreams of Enough

I dream of having enough time
to pursue purple imagination
across the page—or the morning sky,
enough imagination to chase bore-
dom
and despair out of their gray dens
into the warming sun,
enough boredom to appreciate work
that gets me out of bed with a pur-
pose
—a purpose that gives a little joy
to scatter like clover seed on soft
earth.

I dream of having enough time and
strength
to get all my work done
—classes prepared for sharp young
minds,
or juice squeezed from late tomatoes
—enough peaches and plums pre-
served
for barren winter days.

I dream of having time enough for
quiet places
—like the cabin by the river where
the blue heron stands tall and watch-
ful,
and I can hear the rhythm of rain on
the tin roof,

where peace drops like the rain and
collects enough grace to forgive
the thoughtless words of others.
I want to make time enough to
kiss the wrinkled faces—old or
young,
to hold hands that are withered or
plump,
and to drop into some hands a little
hope,
knowing that but for God's grace,
I am the man without legs,
begging on a Chengdu street.

I can also dream of justice
like a clear flowing stream,
cleansing the earth of all its corrup-
tions,
but I want my dreams to be as present
as one task, one face, one moment,
or one cup of water,
and in these dreams,
I want to trust, I may find
God's enough.

—*Esther Stenson, Harrisonburg, Vir-
ginia, teaches English at James
Madison University and is author
of the collection of poems Miracle
Temple (DreamSeeker Books, im-
print of Cascadia Publishing
House, 2009).*