

DreamSeeker Magazine

Voices from the Soul



Who Are the Voiceless Now?

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Beneath the Skyline

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Books, Faith, World & More

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Mary Alice Hostetter

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The Snapshot of a Congregation

Mark. R. Wenger

and much more

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Editorial: Voices of the Voiceless

Marilyn Kennel asks, “Who are the voiceless now?” This issue of *DreamSeeker Magazine* provides no tidy answers—but does seek to give prominence to voices perhaps inadequately heard.

Deborah Good gives voice to depression, and in so doing likely enables others who share her experience to gain a voice. Rachael King releases the voice of her “private dancer.” Daniel Hertzler reviews biographies of persons from communities that have experienced voicelessness, whether Palestinians, South African blacks under apartheid, or those committed to nonviolence.

Mary Alice Hostetter celebrates and gives voice to a mother from a very different lifestyle than her own. David Brattston highlights the voices of those who refuse to swear oaths. Mark Wenger gives voice to a congregation whose patterns seem too unique to fit any one current “buzz” model of congregational life. David Greiser’s review of “Up in the Air” celebrates ways that film allows the voices of actual unemployed people to be movingly heard.

Renee Gehman in a sense gives

voice to “stuff” and its appropriate and inappropriate claims versus Jesus’ “oath and covenant.” I ponder the impact of our electronic voices. And Noel King seems to me deliciously to close out this issue with a report on cars who actually speak (as I know my own car does). The poets speak of matters, whether sorrows or struggles with faith, often left unvoiced.

“Who are the voiceless now?” This issue of *DreamSeeker Magazine* provides no tidy answers—but does seek to give prominence to voices perhaps inadequately heard from.

Then there may be a sense in which it’s time for me to seek to empower other editorial voices to speak. Plans for DSM remain tentative, but I’ve been invited to be dean of Eastern Mennonite Seminary starting July 1. My best guess is that as some of my time shifts to EMS I’ll retain some editorial voice as editor in chief of *DSM* while needing to find at least another editorial voice to join the voice of Renee Gehman as assistant editor.

Whatever the mix of voices, I do envision *DSM* continuing to be dedicated to “voices from the soul.” Special thanks to you readers who allow such voices to speak by listening so carefully and affirmingly.

—Michael A. King



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Relics

I've read there was a time
when the pious venerated them
 bone of St. Peter's little finger
 swatch of cloth from the Savior's robe
 splintered fragment of the Holy Cross

But here in my house are the true relics
this bedroom floor rug
 Grandma wove from old clothes
on the shelf there a cast iron rooster bank
 my mother told me she prized as a little girl
here hanging in its place in the garage
 this garden rake
 handle worn smooth by Dad's strong grip
and there against the wall the piano now long silent
 that she could bring to life
—Bach, old hymns, Scott Joplin, songs to sing with our
 daughter—tunes
happy and sad

Go ahead
 touch them
 carefully prayerfully
 with your fingers
 your hands

They are holy things.

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

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

Who Are the Voiceless Now?

Marilyn Kennel

Twenty years ago I was approaching middle age and I had issues with the Mennonite church—that is, the church as I had known and experienced it. Inner turmoil and ambivalence swirled around my self-identity, my gifts and interests, and the role of women in church leadership.

From earliest childhood, as I heard my grandpa joyfully speak of teaching Bible school and holding prophecy conferences, I had dreamed of working in the church. As years went by, I continued to feel an irresistible pull to some form of ministry, but the image was always fuzzy. The specifics of my calling and how I might be useful to the church never came into focus.

My unfulfilled dream was like a low-grade fever, an ever-present ache. I learned to live with it, but it was never far from my mind. Emotional pain was stirred when I read of other women's successes. Embarrassing tears would well up at unexpected times, provoked, perhaps, by an innocent question about my education or my career.

I had been taught to respect and obey the voices of authority in my church as the voice of God. Personal calls to service were discerned and confirmed by the

church. My parents modeled these qualities, submitting to the church without question. As a young adult I listened for affirmation and encouragement that would give me a sense of direction. When it was not forthcoming, I felt helpless, alienated, and confused.

Nevertheless, I gave my heart to the church and related institutions, making every effort to be available, accepting each new responsibility as an opportunity to serve while exploring my gifts and paving the way for other women with similar interests. During these years I often felt caught up in a dance of hope and frustration that swayed forward one step and backward two.

I was devastated when, in a conference-level (denominational regional cluster of congregations) committee meeting, a bishop flatly remarked that pastors in his district of the conference believed that for a woman to be in leadership was a “perversion of her sexuality, just as homosexuality is a perversion.” I was chairing the meeting. He was talking about *me!* Such experiences deepened my wounds and heightened my sense of futility for a future in the church.

The opportunity to pursue a degree in religious and Anabaptist studies at a local college offered new perspective on my religious experience. Immersion in the timeline of Anabaptist history perked my interest in the

theology of suffering—the notion that those who follow Jesus will suffer.

Historians analyzing the early Mennonite experience in North America note the loss of suffering as an organizing principle and trace the emerging characteristic of humility. A subsequent rise in evangelical fervor favored strong and vocal male leadership. Humility, therefore, began to lose relevance. Then with twentieth century activism, an identity of service began to become more dominant.

Though committed to both humility and service, I also felt an unexplained resonance with suffering. Why would I, a woman of relative privilege, have a sense of suffering? Following this thread of thought led to broader questions.

Who *are* the people who suffer today? *They are those who have no voice, those who are powerless.* And who, in the church, is without voice and powerless? In that answer, I found my connection to suffering. *It is present in the lives of those who seek a role in the church but differ from those who interpret faith and practice.* For much of my life, my gender had limited my options and placed me among those without voice.

In my formative years, my interests were not necessarily church related, but they helped cement my perception of a woman’s place in tenacious ways. I loved playing softball with my brother and his friends, but only boys could participate in orga-

nized sports. I enjoyed music and wanted to play an instrument in the band, but the band wore uniforms and we girls were forbidden to wear men’s clothing. My earliest memories are of being denied what I wanted to do, always with words that rang like an accusation, “You’re not allowed. You are a girl. You can’t do that. You’re a girl.”

Continuing my studies, I was surprised to learn that suffering and power occur in cycles—that those who are powerless and persecuted often gain acceptance and status only to unleash righteous anger upon others in the name of God and orthodox belief. The pattern is documented in the Mennonite story.

The first Christian believers developed from a ragged, egalitarian beginning to become the powerful and hierarchical Roman Catholic Church, claiming sole authority to interpret Scripture and dispense salvation. The powerless became the powerful, and persons who challenged them faced severe consequences. Well-known reformer Martin Luther risked martyrdom in his breach with the Catholic Church and then gained control of his own state church only to become a persecutor of his dissenters.

Fascinated by what I found, I continued to explore. I read that Anabaptists of the Reformation were persons of the Bible and their encounter with Scripture transformed their lives. They were interested in the word, intent, and spirit of Christ. The New Testament became their authority in

matters of faith and practice.

Their refusal to submit to church authority in areas of dispute brought vehement retaliation. They were accused of heresy and called by disparaging names. They had not intended to separate from the church, but hostility and intolerance forced them to go. Their presence was too great a challenge to the system. The description of these experiences seemed remarkably familiar and current.

I followed the story into more recent times. Fleeing persecution in Europe, our forefathers and foremothers established communities in the Western hemisphere, eventually developing their own systems of orthodoxy and discipline. With a passion for right beliefs and right practice and with the intention of protecting the church from sin and worldly influence, leaders centralized authority, codified practice, and reshaped the church in ways that allowed little room for anyone with a differing interpretation.

Numerous schisms ensued. Residual models of authority and traditional interpretations masking as biblical absolutes continued to pain and alienate sincere seekers open to new paradigms of faithfulness.

Identifying these repeating patterns was a significant epiphany for me. I saw women’s struggle—my struggle—as another knobby thread woven into the tattered tapestry of church history. The perspective was empowering, sobering, and life-changing.

I was devastated when . . . a bishop flatly remarked that . . . for a woman to be in leadership was a “perversion of her sexuality, just as homosexuality is a perversion.”

When I recognized that others had dared to challenge church authority in many forms, a window of possibility opened for me. A sense of personal power came in knowing that my voice and experience is valid, that I do not have to be a victim to those who would claim authority over me, that I am responsible to live in a manner congruent with my unfolding understanding of spiritual truth and practice, that I have options and can choose my own path.

I was transformed and freed to work for change, to spend years as an advocate for other women seeking to use their gifts, to say “Enough!” to those who would prescribe my behavior and proscribe my voice. I found a community of believers that is open to my questions, encourages my journey, and is not threatened by diversity.

I was sobered by the ongoing use and misuse of power among us, yet I remained wary of some of the methods proposed to bring change. I did not want to participate in a march to liberation that would merely replace one face of domination with another. I did not want to compromise my vision of Jesus, the compassionate one who came to break the cycle of oppression, who freed us from the bondage of power-seeking and re-

venge. I did not want to be complicit in the misuse of power no matter the intent!

Twenty years later, I continue to observe and ponder. Because we have been a people of humility and service, do we find it difficult to acknowledge the presence of power in our religious institutions? When did right doctrine become more important than how we treat one another? When, as followers of Jesus, did we begin to compromise in the use of coercive power? When will we measure the justice of our community by how we treat the powerless?

Who are the people now disenfranchised, without voice, denied access to meaningful roles in our churches? Who are those longing for affirmation and blessing, eager to contribute their energy and their gifts for the benefit of the community of faith? Who are those experiencing persecution at the hands of the powerful? Does my epiphany offer hope to those caught in the current cycle of suffering? Who will stand and shout “Enough!”?

—*Marilyn Kennel, Mount Joy, Pennsylvania, is grateful to worship with the welcoming folks at Community Mennonite Church of Lancaster.*

Who are the people now disenfranchised, without voice, denied access to meaningful roles in our churches?



Everyone Else is Doing Perfectly Fine

Deborah Good

1

It can be hard to get up in the morning. This is sometimes because I have a cold, because I am imprisoned by a heavy pile of blankets, or because I must pay the consequences for unruly late-night activities (like studying, ahem).

But sometimes it is hard to get up in the morning because life does not feel worth getting up for. George, Colin Firth's character in “A Single Man,” says in the movie's opening lines that “for the past eight months, waking up has actually hurt.” He goes on to describe the terrible drowning feeling that has him contemplating ending it all.

I am occasionally visited by dark spells. My spells are usually brief and relatively mild, and I know my battles are small compared with those of friends who fight regularly with more vicious inner-beasts. Yet regardless of how long and intense they are, the life-valleys we walk through—my friends, myself, David the Psalmist, Rumi the poet, and just about everyone else I can think of—can knock the wind out of us, sometimes quite literally, and leave us panting and thirsty.

7

We often label it tidily with three syllables: *Depression*. While mild to serious forms of depression and other mental illnesses are very common in this country, we often bring them out of hiding only in our therapists' offices, the privacy of our homes and cars, and conversations with our closest friends, if we share them at all. Because we keep so quiet about our bouts with life's heavier sides, it is easy to think that while we struggle solitarily—with our minds, our marriages, our small and large despairs—most everyone else is doing perfectly fine.

2

There are many ways to cope with sad and hopeless days, and days where the mind runs off without our permission. John O'Donohue, a late philosopher and poet, spoke several years ago at a conference I attended. "I always think that the primary Scripture is nature," he told us, "and that if you attend to nature, you never go too far wrong."

Perhaps this is why, on bad days, I have often found myself sitting by Philadelphia's Schuylkill River, watching the ripples, the geese, and the elegant strokes of crew teams as the sun turns everything shades of orange and pink.

O'Donohue went on. "I knew this person one time who had fierce trouble with her mind," he said. "And she said to me that she brought a stone into her living room and when she'd feel her mind begin to go, she would focus on the stone because, she said to me, there is huge sanity in stone."

That image has stuck with me.

Coping with serious mental illness is clearly a different thing than my occasional trips to the river, and I don't mean to make an unfair comparison. The story, though, is remarkable and holds a lesson for all of us: The natural world has much to offer—in its beauty, its unconditional acceptance of us, and, yes, maybe even in stone—as we find our way through.

I have a variety of coping strategies when faced with my mini-bouts of depression, including trips to sit by the river, but I have found that a candid acknowledgment to a friend is one of my most foolproof. "It was a bad head day," I say, meaning that I had endured a barrage of my own self-criticism throughout. Earlier in the week, the same friend sent me an email with a similar confession: *Had to take about a half hour and silence the mean voices in my head at the end of the day, she wrote, so that I could sleep.*

We tell each other these things because we feel less crazy that way. Perhaps we think that the critical voices in our heads will learn to hush up if we broadcast to others their secret existence. These simple, honest conversations when I am feeling awful help me feel cared for and less alone.

3

"If we were better friends, we would need fewer shrinks," I remember a professor saying to us, a classroom of undergrads, in our Introduction to Counseling course. His point was that even if we did not go on to be counselors, the skills we learned in this 100-level course could serve us well in our friendships. And

he may be right that if we took better care of one another, we would need professional help less often. But even the best friendships are not always enough. Sometimes we do need shrinks. And sometimes we need medication, too.

One of my very best friends "has and will likely always have this unmerciful fight to fight, called bipolar," to quote the words I wrote in my journal last year, angry about it. I admire Russell greatly, not only for the ways he has learned to live with his illness but for his willingness to talk about it—and to make someone drive him to the hospital when he knows he has hit deeply shaky ground.

Russell has worked with mentally ill clients as a social worker and raised money for NAMI (the National Alliance on Mental Illness). He actively fights the stigma of mental illness. And he has opinions about medication. He took the issue on in a piece he wrote for an organizational newsletter, quoted here with his permission.

There has been an ultra-liberal backlash against medications and the companies manufacturing them, and rightly so. . . . Many along this line of thinking believe that alternative therapies are enough to quell the storm of mental illness. Proper nutrition, exercise, sleep, and routine are all things that must be present to help those of us who are afflicted

with mental illness, and they really do. But sometimes it's not enough. . . . A large majority of the SDMI (severe and disabling mental illness) population need the chemical supplement. I need the chemical supplement. . . . Walk a mile in our shoes; you'd be saying something different.

4

Mental health is, of course, a field of academic study, complete with experimental-design research and volumes upon volumes of journal articles and books. In addition to the academics, there are the practitioners—clinical social workers, professional counselors, marriage and family therapists, clinical psychologists, counseling psychologists, and psychiatrists. It can be heard to keep track.

Yet while one might study Erikson and Freud, and write a paper comparing cognitive-behavioral and psychodynamic approaches, I think just about everyone in the field will agree that much of mental health remains a mystery (interesting that a few years ago, I wrote something very similar about our physical health and cancer). Therapy, like life, is art as much as it is science.

It seems that a good place to start in removing the stigma from depression and mental illness would be to simply acknowledge that not all of us are happy all of the time.

A good place to start in removing the stigma from depression . . . would be to simply acknowledge that not all of us are happy all of the time.

My great-great grandmother, who did an exceptional job of handling a farm and raising ten children, had a fatal fight with depression. She took her own life in 1918, the year my grandfather was born. He himself did not learn of the suicide until years later. “Suicides in those days were the worst thing that you could do as a person,” he explained to me in an interview a few years ago. “Taking your own life was a mortal sin.”

Though times have changed, it’s a story that is not told often in our family. I sometimes wish it were. If I had known that depression was part of life, and maybe even part of my family tree, I would have felt less alone and abnormal at points along the way. Now I know she comes, but I have also learned that she always eventually packs up and goes.

In the meantime, whenever she’s around, I make my trips to sit by the

river. I write, listen to music, and read poetry, which I have often found to be more honest about these things than the rest of us are. *I am so distant from the hope of myself*, writes Mary Oliver. *The universe is dust. Who can bear it?* adds Jane Kenyon. I go for runs and work on building a relationship with a therapist. And I let my friends know when the world has become dark in my head, because I feel less crazy that way.

That is how I get through. What about you?

—*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/Cascadia, 2009). She can be reached at deborahagood@gmail.com.*



The Private Dancer

Rachael L. King

In my dancing, I am two people.

Publicly, I move in the socially acceptable manner, moving within my dance space, blending in to the crowd, having fun, but under control.

Privately, I’m a nutcase. I fling my arms in dangerously wide arcs, swing my head in circles, stomp up and down, jump around, throw in some punches, all the while leaving my mouth hanging open in some strange cross between a grin and a grimace. I love it. There are few things more freeing in the world than the feeling of throwing your arms and legs high into the air, out to the sides, twisting, turning, and cavorting without the care of who’s going to think you’re crazy or strange.

Life is like that. Every time I’m asked my current major, I cringe at the explanation I’m about to have to give to justify the fact that I went from a pre-med student to the undirected liberal arts major. The pre-med student was my public dancer . . . the liberal arts student is throwing her arms to the sky, dancing against the norms, against the beaten tracks, there, she has broken free.

Publicly, I dry my hair. I put on my daily regiment of make-up. I pull on the tight jeans, I don the attractive, but slightly uncomfortable Ralph Lauren polo

shirt. Meanwhile her soft voice says, “get back in bed you dummy, sleep that extra forty minutes that you just wasted on looking a little better than real.” The private dancer stays in her shell.

So why not bring out the private dancer? Why not unleash her to the world? The farther I get along in this young life of mine, the more I feel her pecking away at the shell of the public dancer. Every now and then, a hand or foot gets through, rocking the boat just the slightest bit. Sometimes the hand gets slapped, sometimes the foot gets stomped. . . but sometimes . . . on those rare and beautiful occasions. . . she’s celebrated, loved, appreciated. And when that happens, I know I’ve been given a gift.

I challenge myself.

I challenge you.

Find your private dancer. Let her notice the sunsets without thinking

**Let her
dance until her
breath comes
in gasps, until
her face flushes
pink. . . .**

about what work needs to be done once she gets home, let her feel the softness of a new pink snuggie without worrying that it was an impulse buy, let her taste the intricacies of a really, really good brownie without worrying about what it will do to her body later. Let her go barefoot in the mud without worrying about getting dirty, let her shout when she’s frustrated without worrying about getting in trouble, and celebrate her beauty without nitpicking the imperfections.

Above all, let her dance until her breath comes in gasps, until her face flushes pink, until she collapses into bed for that extra forty minutes of sleep.

—*Rachael L. King, Harrisonburg, Virginia, is a senior, Eastern Mennonite University, and hosts a public and a private dancer.*



History as Viewed Through Personal Experience

Reviews of Once Upon a Country; Rabble for Peace; and War, Peace and Social Conscience

Daniel Hertzler

Once Upon a Country, by Sari Nusseibeh with Anthony David. 542 pp., no index. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007.

Rabble Rouser for Peace, by John Allen, 481 pp., Free Press, 2006.

War, Peace and Social Conscience, by Theron Schlabach, 721 pp., Herald Press, 2009.

Why read biography? For those of us who have an interest in history, biography focuses a section of history through an individual’s experience. If it is not the big picture, it provides a focused view of the person’s time, organized around a series of personal events. At times this may add more personal details than we want if we are only concerned about the big picture.

These three books provide three different approaches: autobiography, authorized biography while

the subject still lives, and a scholarly review after the subject's death. I have been somewhat familiar with each of these three situations. So what I gained from these presentations was not so much new information but rather better overall understanding regarding details of the person's life.

Sari Nusseibeh would have us understand that his family has been known in Palestine for 13 centuries and he suggests that they will not be going away despite oppression by the Israelis. This perspective on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict supports what we have learned from other sources: since 1948 the record has been one of Israeli chicanery on one side and Arabic disorganization on the other. "The Jewish leadership . . . knew precisely what they wanted. They had a plan and the discipline to carry it out." In contrast, the Arabs did not realize "what they were up against" (46-47). This pattern is repeated throughout the book.

Yet Nusseibeh is among the Arabs who have been able to survive and prosper in a measure. He could study in England where he met and courted Lucy, an English girl. He had been in England during the 1967 war and was shocked by the changes brought about by the Jewish victory. Sari's father was a lawyer and recommended that at that time the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) should negotiate with the Israelis for a solution involving separate states for the Israelis and the Palestinians. "The PLO ignored his advice. 'Your father,'

Yasser Ameri explained, 'had a far longer range of view than we did. Given the nationalistic mood back then, there was no way we could have listened to him'" (103).

Sari would take Lucy back to his home, where she became a Muslim and they married. After marriage he took a job with an oil company in Abu Dhabi, but he found he was not cut out for business. He would eventually obtain a Ph.D. from Harvard University. His career in Palestine/Israel became a mixture of teaching and political activity. The latter, he writes, he did unwillingly but it was pressed upon him. He describes experience after experience in which the Israelis got the upper hand despite worldwide efforts to give the Palestinians a break.

Along the way Sari and Lucy managed to raise a family and in 1995 he became president of Al-Quds University, a Palestinian school which when he was appointed "existed more in name than in reality" (386). He gave attention to building up the school. In the meantime, "The most significant development I observed from my perch on the hill was the strangulation of Jerusalem" (393).

Since the university board and students both represented conflicting perspectives among the Palestinians, Sari had to spend considerable raw effort fighting internal "fires." Also, when the university began to grow, the Israeli government began legal harassment. At the same time Israeli settlements continued to grow as did

oppression of Palestinians. "The PA's weakness can be traced back to all the familiar home-grown problems of corruption, bad management, and so long. . . ." But "The biggest problem . . . was still the occupation" (421).

Yet Nusseibeh came out against violence. In a speech at Hebrew University he stated that "Israelis and Palestinians,' I told them, 'are not enemies at all.' A disbelieving hush spread over my listeners. 'If anything we are strategic allies'" (450).

His moderate viewpoint made him an enemy of the Israeli government and they began to harass him. He responded with basic nonviolent tactics. When they tried to shut down the university, his university "team . . . went to work calling journalists, public figures, lawyers and politicians. Appeals went out for public support from Israelis as well as from leaders all over the world, including the White House" (491).

I realize that as an autobiography, this presents the Palestinian story without a corresponding Jewish account. I'm quite aware of the Israeli story, how numbers of Jews were desperate for a place to go to get away from oppression. The Arab nations opposed them violently and ineffectively. But I have read enough critiques of Israel by Jews themselves to believe that this autobiography is an authentic story.

In the end Nusseibeh insists that Israelis and Palestinians will have to live together. "The only hope comes when we listen to the wisdom of tradition, and acknowledge that Jerusalem cannot be won through violence. It is

the city of three faiths and it is open to the world" (534). *Once Upon a Country* ends with issues unresolved but with the author's intention to persevere. He implies that his family line will continue in the region whatever government is in charge. Palestinians have long memories.

In contrast to this unfinished story, *Rabble Rouser for Peace* shows one whose efforts would lead to a kind of success. One might ask why blacks in South Africa were able to defeat apartheid when Palestinians in Israel have not succeeded. No doubt in part the difference is that described by Nusseibeh: the hardheaded strategy of the Israelis confronting less-than-focused Palestinian leadership. And as the biography of Desmond Tutu will show, South Africans were eventually to receive worldwide attention, probably more, and more specific, than the Palestinians have.

In certain respects, Tutu's career was similar to Nusseibeh's. A man of intelligence and personal discipline, he was able to work his way up through an oppressive system by making use of the opportunities. He would study outside the country and become a recognized theologian. He would respond to one invitation after the other for increased responsibility in the Anglican organization.

As he became aware of racial and political tensions throughout the African continent, he began to articulate a "black" theology and "within a few years he became simultaneously a defiantly outspoken advocate for black South Africans and an emo-

tional exponent of reconciliation with whites" (137).

In 1974 Tutu was elected dean of St. Mary's Cathedral, "the first black dean of a South African Cathedral" (145). On this page the author observes that now Tutu "stepped onto the public stage." He writes that "He was a cross-cultural communicator with an ebullient personality, as much at ease in Western as in African settings. He had experienced the issues of working in an institution that tried at the same time both to repudiate and to survive in a police state."

In 1978 Tutu became executive of the South African Council of Churches. One of the issues he faced as head of the SACC was the question of violence. "Tutu's attitude toward violence was in line with the SACC's policy, which combined an understanding of the reasons for taking up arms with a blanket condemnation of all violence, from whatever side it came, and an appeal to young white men facing military conscription to consider becoming conscientious objectors" (172-173). His "instrument of choice in the peaceful struggle against apartheid became economic pressure in the form of divestment and sanctions" (175).

As SACC executive Tutu became involved in the issues of apartheid in a manner he had never before faced. Now came the worldwide attention. "Internationally the government gave Tutu an audience the like of which he

had never had before" (182). In 1984 Tutu received the Nobel Peace Prize while on sabbatical in the U.S. The prize gave him increased international attention. The call for sanctions was taken more seriously. Although Thatcher and Reagan were cool toward him, the U.S. Congress overrode a Reagan veto of a Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act (261-262).

Next came his election as Anglican bishop of Johannesburg and then South African archbishop, a post he was to hold until his retirement. In his address after enthronement Tutu said, "Whether I like it or not, and whether he likes it or not, [then-President] P. W. Botha is my brother and I must desire and pray the best toward him" (266-267). Such theological interpretation of political issues was to be a regular part of his campaign against apartheid.

Following the 1989 election of F. W. de Klerk as president of South Africa in place of the ailing Botha, Tutu joined a protest march of 30,000 people having refused to seek permission. "After Cape Town had cracked the government's ban on peaceful protest, an unstoppable flood of marches swept the country" (311). In February 1990, de Klerk released Nelson Mandela from prison and Tutu provided overnight lodging for Nelson and Winnie Mandela (313).

But the problems were not over. "Some 14,000 South Africans died in political violence during the four

years between Mandela's release and the first democratic elections in 1994" (324). Finally on May 9, 1994, Mandela was elected president. "The inauguration in Pretoria the next day was said to be the largest gathering of heads of state since John F. Kennedy's funeral." Tutu led the closing prayer (339).

One more major task fell to Tutu, to serve as chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Tutu held that "if South Africans were to overcome the damage [apartheid] had caused, they had to face up to and work through its consequences" (342). Tutu's concern was "'restorative justice' which he described as characteristic of traditional African jurisprudence. . . . This kind of justice seeks to rehabilitate both the victim and the perpetrator, who should be given the opportunity to be integrated into the community he or she has injured by his or her offense" (347).

Numbers of people from both sides appeared before the commission, but Botha refused to appear and de Klerk "failed to make full disclosure" (364). Richard Goldstone wrote of the TRC that without it there would "have been roughly speaking two major histories . . . a black history . . . and a white history which would have been based on fabricated denials. . . . The TRC has put an end to those denials" (370).

In an Epilogue Allen observed that "As Desmond Tutu approached his seventy-fifth birthday he felt both vindicated and blessed" (391). Yet not all was what he would have hoped.

"Much has been done," he said in 2004. "People have clean water and electricity who never had these before but we are sitting on a powder keg because the gap between the rich and the poor is widening and some of the very rich are now black" (392).

An unauthorized biography might have been more objective and more widely researched. Yet I find this a useful review of South African history through the experience of Tutu, a remarkable man who worked against great obstacles and accomplished what a lesser man could not have done.

From Sari Nusseibeh of whom I had never heard before and Desmond Tutu, whom I had seen on television, I turn to Guy F. Hershberger, whom I personally worked with from time to time. Hershberger did not encounter the sort of violence faced by Nusseibeh and Tutu. He never had a bodyguard and would have refused it as a personal conviction. He functioned during a period of relative peace for North American Mennonites.

Yet he is interesting from the standpoint that he also had a vision which he pursued with some success. His vision was an attempt to clarify the ethical position of the Mennonite tradition and to advocate for its practice.

He came into teaching and denominational leadership from a farm in Iowa. He was teaching and doing graduate work while he and his wife Clara were raising a family during the Great Depression when his college at

Tutu's concern was "restorative justice" which he described as characteristic of traditional African jurisprudence. . . ."

Goshen, Indiana, could scarcely pay faculty salaries. Schlabach observes, “While Guy studied at the State University of Iowa from 1932 to 1935, he and Clara lived partly by managing a lodging house. Apparently they also borrowed some money. Beyond that, just how they lived and supported his study remains a mystery” (81).

Hershberger would write two seminal volumes treating Mennonite ethics: *War, Peace and Nonresistance* (Herald Press, 1944; revised in 1953 and 1969) and *The Way of the Cross in Human Relations* (Herald Press, 1958). The former came out when I was of draft age. I am confident that I read it and found it convincing. I was already a CO deferred to work on my father’s farm, but to have a theological interpretation of our peace position was reassuring.

Schlabach writes “The great achievement of *War, Peace and Nonresistance* was to offer a platform of biblical pacifism from which, sooner or later, Mennonites and others could move out to broader social and political witness” (118).

The second volume appeared during the era of the Mennonite Community Movement. This was an effort supported by Hershberger to bring together Mennonite farmers, small-business people, and workers to seek to clarify what it would mean to follow Christ in their economic activities.

For six years, beginning in 1947, the Mennonite Community Association would have its own magazine, *The Mennonite Community*. It was a well-illustrated feature magazine

which for a time had its own staff photographer. The magazine never gained enough circulation to cover its costs and in 1954 was merged with *Christian Monitor* to become *Christian Living: A Magazine for Home and Community*.

For two decades Hershberger’s name would appear on the masthead of the magazine as a consulting editor and until 1964 the staff would include a community life editor. Then a constricted editorial budget called for elimination of this position. I write here from my own experience since, beginning in 1952, I was office editor of *The Mennonite Community* magazine, then assistant editor of *Christian Living* until 1960 and editor of that magazine through 1973. I find Schlabach’s review an adequate record of these developments.

The Mennonite Community movement would eventually run down for lack of interest even though the association still had some assets. In contrast to the magazine, which could not cover its costs from 1950 to 1972, the association sponsored *The Mennonite Community Cookbook*, which provided income to the association. By 1972 Mennonite Publishing House was ready to publish a cookbook and the association transferred the cookbook to MPH. In 1993 I was a member of the committee which dispersed the association’s assets (212-215).

Schlabach observes, however, that Hershberger’s thinking was not trapped in a dying movement. He writes that “over his career [Hershberger] allowed his community ideas

to alter and adapt. As they did, they became less ruralist, less ethnic, and more centered in church and theology” (216).

In a chapter on Hershberger’s encounter with the thought of Reinhold Niebuhr, Schlabach writes that “instead of a strategy that began with Western civilization’s crises, with political power, and with humans’ tragic ‘necessities,’ Hershberger insisted on beginning with the ethical teachings of Jesus and the New Testament. From those premises he developed a strategy, not of political power, but of a faithful church giving its corporate witness” (365).

Schlabach humanizes Hershberger at various points throughout the book, particularly in a chapter on “Tenacity to a Fault,” describing three situations in which Hershberger came out “swinging” (367-393). Of particular interest to me are two of these in which I was somewhat involved, in the first as an observer and in the second as an administrator.

J. Lawrence Burkholder wrote a dissertation at Princeton Theological Seminary on “The Problem of Social Responsibility from the Perspective of the Mennonite Church.” Burkholder took a more “realist” approach to the interpretation of Mennonite community ethics. Schlabach observes, “Whether or not he intended it as such, a good bit of Burkholder’s dissertation amounted, in context, to a frontal attack on huge chunks of what

Hershberger had been working for” (370-371).

Although Schlabach indicates that in his responses “Hershberger stayed with the substance without becoming personal,” an incident I witnessed appeared to go beyond substance. It was a seminar for the staff of *Christian Living* magazine, where both Hershberger and Burkholder read papers.

“A good bit of Burkholder’s dissertation amounted, in context, to a frontal attack on huge chunks of what Hershberger had been working for.”

Hershberger appeared first on the program. He had received an advance copy of Burkholder’s paper and was able to use “about two-thirds of his own paper to apply the surgeon’s scalpel to what Burkholder was about to deliver” (378-379).

Then, as I remember, he went around the table and retrieved the copies of his paper. Schlabach wishes it might have been possible to devise a synthesis of the two positions. “The result might have been a little less Babel in Mennonite ethics and some greater clarity in the Mennonite witness.

“Whatever the complex causes, in the case of Burkholder, Hershberger’s tenacity did not serve him well” (385).

Another conflict, one in which I got directly involved, was with J. Lorne Peachey, my successor as editor of *Christian Living* magazine. Peachey had a degree in journalism but no background in the Mennonite Community movement and may not have met Hershberger before. For a

twenty-fifth anniversary issue, he asked Hershberger for a 1,000-word article on “the decline of the Mennonite community vision.” Had he understood Hershberger’s academic style and personal identification with the cause, he surely would not have given him such an assignment.

Hershberger wrote a longer article which was not found acceptable. We got them together for attempted mediation. Schlabach writes, “The efforts at reconciliation probably increased mutual understanding, but they did not fully succeed. Hershberger’s manuscript never went to print” (386).

In an Afterword, Schlabach reflects on Hershberger’s contribution. He lists nine points in a summary of Hershberger’s convictions and then observes, “In his own

time, a host of ethically earnest people, Mennonites and others, thought that what Hershberger said was worth their listening. Even persons who differed with him were often in his debt. . . . Later generations share that debt, and so also surely, will generations to come” (517).

Three academics, who each, in his own way, has sought to make a difference. For Tutu the differences have been most visible and dramatic. But Nusseibeh insists that regardless of what the Israelis do, Palestinians will remain. And, as Schlabach observes, Hershberger has spoken and we do well to listen.

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



Planting on the Ugone Sign

Mary Alice Hostetter

The phone rang ten times, and there was no answer when I tried to call my mother at 7:00 the morning of her ninetieth birthday. A bit concerned, I tried again before I left for work. That time she answered in six rings.

“Happy Birthday,” I said. “Where were you?”

“Out in the garden. We need to finish planting. Still have to put in the pickles, corn, limas, and string beans. Thought sure we had enough seeds, but I had to send Daddy down to the hardware store for more. It’s the upgone sign—I checked the *Farmers’ Almanac*,” she said. “And the ground is finally dry enough for planting again. I’m glad I got the lettuce and peas in before it got so wet.”

“So what are you going to do to celebrate your birthday?”

“Hadn’t given it much thought. Try to finish up the garden, I guess.”

Birthday celebrations had been much on my mind. I was approaching my own fiftieth, as were many of my friends. Some had already passed that marker, so conversations frequently turned to celebrations of the “BIG FIVE-O.” One friend had done a

middle aged Outward Bound experience, camping and hiking and sleeping in furrows on beds of pine needles. Another had a week of silence at a Zen retreat; another a week of self-indulgence with mudbaths and mineral baths and massage. Some had chosen travel, theater, good food, and wine. I couldn't decide what indulgences of the body, mind, or spirit would be just right for me.

I tried to imagine my mother, a simple Mennonite woman, celebrating in a mudbath in California, or on a trek to Nepal. I couldn't imagine her celebrating in any of the ways I had heard of or considered for myself.

But I could imagine her, and see her clearly, scurrying in from the garden to answer the phone, bent over a bit, using the hoe as a sort of oar to push off as she hurried, sunbonnet strings streaming loose in the spring breeze, the laces of her garden shoes—dusty black sneakers—undone to keep the pressure off her bunions.

I could imagine her standing there talking on the hallway phone, one hand on the small of her back, a chair only a few feet away, but she'd stand. I knew she'd stand.

I tried to imagine my mother, a simple Mennonite woman, celebrating in a mudbath in California, or on a trek to Nepal.

She had a garden to plant, things to do. Eight thirty in the morning on the day of her ninetieth birthday was not a time for sitting. Sitting was for the afternoon, when she might settle in to do some quilting, braid a rug, or write some letters. But it

was a sunny morning in April, and it was dry enough for planting, and it was the upgone sign. It was time to finish putting in the garden.

—*Mary Alice Hostetter, Charlottesville, Virginia, after a career in teaching and human services, has now chosen to devote more time to her lifelong passion for writing. Among the themes she has explored are reflections on growing up Mennonite in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, during the 1950s and 1960s.*



A Sworn Christian

David W. T. Brattston

Because Christ forbids the swearing of oaths in Matthew 5:33-37 and 23:16-22, Mennonites and other Anabaptists refuse to do so but simply affirm the truth in legal transactions.

This interpretation of Matthew's Gospel is not confined to Anabaptists. It has been shared by many Christians over the centuries, including by one religious gentleman who refused to take any oath, affirmation, or other declaration that he would tell the truth to the court. As I shall shortly report, he certainly exercised our abilities to work with the Bible and secular law.

There are two problems if a proposed witness refuses to swear or otherwise solemnly affirm or declare that they will tell the truth. The first is that the judge cannot consider anything the witness might say. In fact, a person who refuses to solemnly so commit would not be allowed to testify, which means that the side in the lawsuit that wants the testimony cannot present the prospective witness's evidence.

The second problem is that such a witness would be in contempt of court for the act of refusing. Contempt proceedings are unpleasant for both the judge and the witness, yet the judge is forced to act to give the parties a fair chance to present the testimony they wish.

Although there are some legal practitioners who prefer, to be doubly on the safe side, that the word *God* be used in oaths and affirmations before them, during the last 250 years courts and legislatures in the United States and British Commonwealth have softened the stricter rules. No longer need the words *God, swear,* or *oath* be used; and the presence of a Bible and raising a hand are optional for witnesses whose consciences do not allow them.

The only requirement now is that in making a declaration to tell the truth, it must be impressed on the minds witnesses that they are indeed under a serious duty to tell the truth.

However, I once encountered a prospective witness who refused to comply with even these minimal requirements. He was presenting himself as a witness in his own behalf at a Canadian three-person panel, on which I served, for judging disputes between landlords and tenants.

The incident began with the chairman saying, “Take the Bible in your right hand and swear that the evidence you give in this/ proceeding will be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God.”

“I can’t swear,” he replied, “it’s against my religion.”

“Fine, then you can make a solemn affirmation.”

“I can’t do that either.”

“Why not?” we asked.

“My Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, has commanded me not to take an oath and has told me to speak the truth at all times, whether under oath or not. I would be disobeying him if I made a statement at one time that I was going to tell the truth because it might be thought that I might not always tell the truth at other times.”

An impasse? Grounds for contempt? Would he be barred from testifying? Fortunately, I was familiar with both secular law and the relevant Scriptures.

I asked, “Are you telling this tribunal that in obedience to your Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, what you say to us will be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?”

“Yes.”

His conscience had been satisfied. The law had been satisfied. He had acknowledged to us that he was under a serious obligation to tell the truth in the proceeding. The Deity had even been called upon, which would satisfy even the most fastidious lawyer. We let him testify.

This conscientious Christian had in effect made a solemn affirmation in a different form than expected, which is legally equivalent to an oath. But we enabled him to do so according to his own religious beliefs. Today’s secular courts are uninterested in the exact

I asked, “Are you telling this tribunal that in obedience to your Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, what you say to us will be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?”

form of a solemn commitment to tell the truth and strive to accommodate a witness’s religious scruples as much as possible.

I did not mention these fine legal points to the witness. It would be against my duty as a judge to argue with the man about the interpretation of Matthew 5:33-37 or Christian principles in general. I took the view that I was not there to run a missionary society and—even if I were—would not try to convert a man whose beliefs

were vastly better than my own.

—*David W. T. Brattston is a freelance writer in Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, Canada, whose articles on early and contemporary Christianity have been published in Canada, England, Australia, South Africa, the Philippines, and the United States. At the time of the incident described in the above article, he was a lawyer member (“judge”) of Canada’s South Shore Residential Tenancies Board.*

Workout

I don’t really have to do this
situps, stretches, leg lifts
(I draw the line at pushups)
boring, boring . . .
and it hurts

So why am I pulling on
my sweatshirt again
and tromping downstairs
to the treadmill?

Was it that article in *Prevention*?
Reggie’s heart attack at 46?
The doc’s “what kind of exercise are you getting”?

Probably not.

It was when she looked at our wedding picture
and then looked at me.
“Dad, you used to be a hunk!”

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

The Snapshot of a Congregation

Mark. R. Wenger

Chiques Church of the Brethren is located near the town of Manheim, Pennsylvania. Until about four years ago I had never heard of the place. Even then it sounded a bit distant, almost quaint, somewhere out there, one of the innumerable churches that dot the American landscape.

The buzz in recent decades of doing church has seemed to circulate around three models: 1) The mega-church with multiple services and a professional staff serving thousands with first-class production and program standards; 2) The deep church that has rediscovered the ancient forms and melodies of worship, the rich liturgies of sights, sounds, and smells; 3) The emerging, experimenting church looking for new expressions because the usual forms no longer seem to work.

Chiques Church of the Brethren, I discovered one cold gray Sunday in February, fit neither my quaint stereotype nor any of the brands of buzz. Here was a traditional congregation where, when you walked in the door, you sensed a spirit of vitality and joy. This place was happening. A big building project half-way under roof crowded the parking lot.

I learned that Chiques practices something called “free ministry.” Six ministers, called from within the congregation, share equally in the activities of ministry. They are “free” because they aren’t on salary. One of the six ministers, Mike Hess, was being ordained on the Sunday I visited. He was a former preaching student and had invited me to be a guest.

The visit intrigued me. Chiques COB is not the kind of congregation that trend-setting magazines typically feature. But I found it refreshing in its simplicity and warmth. I felt community, a *koinonia* of the Spirit. So I recently sat down at their kitchen table with Mike and his wife Denise to find out more and fill in the pencil sketch of that first visit.

First a few salient facts. Attendance for Sunday morning worship averages 375-425. The congregation has been worshipping at the present site for more than 150 years. Attendance and membership have been pretty stable for the last ten years. There is one worship service, rather than two or more, because, in Mike’s words, “We feel pretty strongly that two congregations is not the way to go.”

I learned that this strong sense of community finds expression and is supported through a variety of the congregation’s activities:

- Each of the six ministers is assisted by three deacons. Together they

share pastoral care of 65-70 families. All the households of the congregation are networked in this way

- Deacons visit each member at least once a year. One of the purposes of these visits is to give members the opportunity to talk about their relationship with the congregation and to renew their commitment.

- Twice each year the congregation celebrates Love Feast for all baptized members. To hear Mike and Denise talk, this event is the spiritual highpoint of community: footwashing, a simple fellowship meal,

and communion. The next day something called “Second Day Love Feast” follows. That second feast is “the best meal of the year” according to Denise: cheeses, meat, salads and “lots of desserts.” Leftovers are boxed for distribution in the neighborhood.

- Sunday school classes are active. “We are big on service,” remarked Mike. “We like to get our hands dirty as Sunday school classes.” Adult classes are organized according to age, by decade. Those who are 70 or more years old join in what’s sometimes called “The Class Before the Grass.”

- The congregation has council meeting four times a year to discuss and make major decisions.

Mike Hess, who grew up in the congregation, was “called to the ministry” in 2004. Before that, he had been a deacon. One Sunday the moderating minister announced, “We are going to call a minister in two weeks.”

The visit intrigued me. Chiques COB is not the kind of congregation that trend-setting magazines typically feature. But I found it refreshing. . . .

The pattern at such a special council meeting is for members to go to a room and “give a name.” The person clearly identified by members as the one being called becomes the new minister.

“I still remember that day vividly,” Mike reminisced. “I wasn’t surprised by the call. I kind of expected it and was ready. When it happened, I asked the other ministers, ‘When do I start?’ They said, ‘You are.’” That quick.

But I wondered: A strong sense of community can be a wonderful thing for insiders and those who are part of the networks. What is it like for the outsider and newcomers? When I asked, Mike and Denise chuckled. “There are in fact one or two main families in the church. It seems like half the church is related!” But they hastened to add that the families don’t have a reputation of controlling things. “I feel blessed,” concluded Mike.

In fact hospitality is one of characteristics that guests often mention with appreciation. I echo the sentiment from my first visit. But the Chiques hospitality extends beyond welcoming strangers and visitors. Mike explained that each person who joins the congregation by baptism or membership transfer is assigned a “faith partner” for the next year to help with their integration and growth.

From my experience as a pastor for twenty years in two congregations, I’m confident in guessing that

Chiques has its share of tensions, simmering feuds, and relational frictions. A single Sunday morning visit and a friendly interview with one of the ministers and his wife do not qualify as an investigation.

No congregation is a Swiss watch or Stradivarius violin. A congregation is people. And congregational life is experiential, human, organic, and unpredictable. Sometimes petty, sometime glorious. I’m quite sure that more digging at Chiques would unearth some dirty laundry—but also more treasures.

The interview with Mike and Denise Hess did exceed my expectations, however, in one key way. All I had to go on before talking with them was a first impression from the earlier visit. What surprised me in our conversation was the care and variety of ways by which the congregation intentionally weaves the core value of community into their practices. Community isn’t lip service or pasted-on veneer; it is part of the congregation’s DNA.

Ministry is shared equally; there is no lead or senior pastor (although there is a moderator). The congregation grows its ministers from within. Each household is visited at least once a year; anonymity in a crowd is not church. The congregation marks their bonds of faith and love with special rituals of service, worship, and feasting. Ongoing Sunday school classes provide settings for greater intimacy and focused mission.

Chiques Church of the Brethren

No congregation is a Swiss watch or Stradivarius violin. A congregation is people.

is a traditional, more rural congregation. In the sweep of social and religious diversity, it would probably be on the conservative side of the spectrum but without the hard edges and militancy. At the beginning of our interview Mike made a telling remark: “Each church has importance in God’s kingdom.”

Reflecting on the range of diversity in the broader Church of Brethren, he grinned, and shrugged his shoulders. “We realize our differences. That is them and this is us. We don’t have much in common. But we gather at Annual Conference and try to work together on things we can.”

In church circles these days there is a lot of ferment and talk about rein-

venting faith communities. Many people express a sense of urgency to try something new. Chiques COB provides a helpful reminder that moving forward means more than stretching toward the ever-promising new. Looking to the future is also enriched by leaning back, rediscovering tried and true patterns and practices of community building.

How does a children’s swing begin to move? By leaning back and kicking forward at the same time. That’s a pretty good metaphor for doing church.

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

Dinner

We take your lives,
and you give us delicate flavors:
the communion of the blood of Christ.

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

“Up in the Air”:

Contemporary Film Noir

Dave Greiser

The term *film noir* refers to a style of crime drama popular in the 1950s. But the words literally mean “black film.”

“Up in the Air” is film noir in the most literal sense. A tract for the times, “Up in the Air” is unsure whether it is black comedy or light tragedy. And that delicious indecision is one of the most important characteristics of this film.

Directed by the ever more impressive 32-year-old Jason Reitman (“Thank You for Smoking,” and “Juno”), “Up in the Air” follows the life of Ryan Bingham (played by George Clooney). Ryan is a self-described “termination facilitator,” a mouthpiece hired by corporate executives who lack the courage to fire their own employees.

In a down economy, Ryan’s business is great. He flies from city to city, calmly and professionally dispatching unsuspecting workers before moving on to the next town. Ryan maintains an odd love affair with his work. He takes pride in the service he provides, and he loves the detritus of his work—the recycled airplane air, the endless nondescript motel rooms, the tiny first-class whiskey bottles, the preferential perks of business class flying.

Ryan’s life goal is to reach ten million miles with the same airline and become one of its seven platinum card holders. He is single and prefers it that way. In his spare time he gives motivational talks about “unloading the backpack of your life.” Yet there is a melancholy streak in Ryan’s blithe nonchalance that is gently revealed as the story unfolds.

There are three significant women in Ryan’s life: Alex (Vera Farmiga), a fellow road warrior and bed partner; Natalie (Anna Kendrick), a neophyte colleague who has been brought to the company to initiate firing by web chat—a plan which threatens Ryan’s job; and Kara (Amy Morton), Ryan’s sister who persists in trying to steer Ryan back into the family by helping with her daughter’s wedding. Over time, these characters slowly evoke Ryan’s deeper needs in love, work, and kin.

Some of this film’s most perfect moments are its rich ironies. Ryan’s work involves telling others “their position is no longer available”; Natalie’s work will eventually render Ryan’s work obsolete. Natalie’s career is launched by her invention of cost-effective firing via Internet, and it makes perfect sense until her own love life is terminated by a text message.

Like Reitman’s earlier film, “Thank You for Smoking,” “Up in the Air” contains within it a study in the na-

ture of morality and love in a meaningless universe. “Smoking” followed the justifications and relationships of a spokesman for Big Tobacco. In “Up,” the relationships are more complex, but the context is still embedded in a corporate world devoid of meaning.

In his spare time he gives motivational talks about “unloading the backpack of your life.” Yet there is a melancholy streak in Ryan’s blithe nonchalance that is gently revealed. . . .

My favorite scene takes place on the day of the wedding, when Ryan’s brother-in-law to be gets cold feet and Ryan is pressed by his sister to counsel the boy. “I couldn’t sleep last night,” the groom sputters. “I saw myself married. Then there are kids. The kids go to school.

They get married. I saw my grandkids. Then I was old and alone. Then I was dead. What’s the point?”

Ryan answers matter of factly: “There is no point. But do you want to go through life alone?” It is a moment of revelation for Ryan, as he realizes he is speaking to himself. There is no point, but all things considered, human contact is better than no human contact.

This point is made so subtly the viewer could miss it. Of course, the next question might be, “And *why* is contact better than non-contact?” In a meaningless world, one might just as well opt for Ryan’s chosen life, which at least yields a more painless existence. For that matter, one might opt for no life at all. What is the difference?

There are great strengths in the performances. George Clooney plays

Ryan with a smug confidence mixed with wistful melancholy. The three actresses are not foils to the big star; they share the screen and the story fully with Clooney. Kendrick's Natalie is wound so tightly that when she dissolves in tears at her boyfriend's breakup text I felt the theater audience release its own tension in surprise laughter. Amy Morton's Kara plays the loyal sister with a careworn fatigue that reminded me of some members of my own family.

But I think my favorite performances in the film are not purely "performances" at all. Reitman used actual recently fired employees rather than actors to play those being termi-

nated by their companies. The welter of emotions on their faces as they dramatized the moment that the axe fell on them is the most wrenching, truthful part in the film. It may make this film too contemporary and too personal for people living in this downsizing era to see. But it makes "Up in the Air" a faithful chronicle of a most painful era.

—*Dave Greiser has been reviewing films for DreamSeeker since the beginning of the magazine. He recently relocated from Hesston, Kansas, to Baltimore, Maryland, where he is pastor of North Baltimore Mennonite Church.*

Nameless

"I need something bigger."

So I offer myself, inches taller,
and the mountain, sky, humankind.

"OK, not just bigger, but
something that can provide comfort,
assure me everything will be all right."

But everything isn't all right, is it? I mean it
already isn't and therefore can never be.
Or else it is, without preconception.

Why long for what can no longer be,
or what by faith always is,
when each moment comes
pure and unnamed?

—*Dale Bickler*

"Stuff"— Minimized, Lost, and Appraised

Renee Gehman

Every now and then—about once a month—I go on what I'll call a "decluttering spree" in my bedroom. Usually initiated by a sense of more things than places to put them, at such times I hunker down at a closet or a set of drawers or a box in my storage space and commence my own artless form of separating the sheep from the goats, filling boxes for thrift stores and bags for trash, then retaining what I still can't quite let go.

Despite a regular vigilance with this procedure that functions as an anti-shopping spree, I am always left with a sizeable accumulation of stuff, and there are several reasons for this. First, as a teacher, student, and obedient keeper of files, I am doomed to an eternal surplus of papers.

Second, I face a host of well-intentioned conspirators against my attempts to keep things simple. I speak of fellow college students of yore who left behind perfectly good cooking ware and textbooks and stereos at a year's end—all free for the taking—because a flight home left no room for excess. I speak of the women in my family who for the past decade have at Christmas

bestowed upon me gifts accompanied by a “you probably can’t use it now, but it’s for your hope chest!”

Except the hope chest reached capacity about five years ago. Pie plates, Longaberger baskets, and blankets are all good and useful things, and I certainly appreciate practicalities and thinking ahead. Nonetheless, such things become distressing to store when you’re still living at home with parents.

Last week I joined a group from my church on a service trip to New Orleans, where many people don’t have a lot of stuff. For one week, we worked in groups on home repair for victims of Hurricane Katrina (yes, five years later there is still much work to be done). Post-storm-and-flooding, amid reconstruction the loss of stuff continues still, as heard in stories where tools are stolen from construction sites, or where people have broken into houses being rebuilt and have ripped out new wiring through new dry wall.

As rebuilding has continued these past few years, a question many have asked of the victims is *Why do they stay?* If nothing is left, why not start over again somewhere different, somewhere safer, where selves and stuff might be better preserved?

Quite often the response is something like, “This is my home. I’ve lived here all my life.” That was certainly the case for the church pastor whose home we worked on. She

stopped by one day to check out the paint job, taking time also to pray around us workers. As she prayed, you could feel strength and faith radiate right off of her, and though she did not use these words, I imagined I heard in her prayer the scattered lines of a hymn text that would precipitate my thoughts the rest of that week in

New Orleans:

I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus name . . . his oath, his covenant, his blood support me in the 'whelming flood . . . on Christ the solid rock I stand; all other ground is sinking sand . . . all other ground is sinking sand.

I can only speculate on how the meaning and value of home and stuff is affected for hurricane victims (and others) who have lost it all. Does it mean more to you once it’s gone forever? Or, seeing that you’re still alive and the world still turning, do you conclude that maybe it didn’t matter so much after all? Do you embrace the opportunity to start anew, clutter-free, and pick and choose the stuff you want and need back in your life and home?

In any case, I suspect you understand more deeply the finiteness of things once a levee breaks and all your things are swept away, including your house right off its foundation, as was the case for the pastor who prayed for us.

Having spoken earlier of conspirators against my decluttering attempts I must also speak of myself,

retainer of 20 books “published” in elementary school, many of which I claimed were part of a series-in-the-works on two characters named Sarah and Johnny, whose arms protruded out of their midsections.

Awards for homework completion or a job well done on an art project, wedding programs, drawings from three-year-olds, greeting cards, notes and letters. . . . At what point does it stop feeling like a sin to throw these things out? How many times must one stare at whole piles of sentimental treasures and wonder, *If I just threw this out, would I even regret it?* before one actually then proceeds to throw said piles out? I did once manage to dispose of all of my pottery creations from elementary school—except of course the Phillies pot whose lid had a baseball handle on it. That one I still need.

On a spectrum with, say, a Zen

Buddhist monk at one end and a *bona fide* packrat at the other (the kind, perhaps, whose lawn is littered with old car parts and kitchen sinks), I still like to think I’m a healthy distance from the packrat extreme. Just as I idealistically believe that my molasses-in-January career path will one day lead me to the bliss of professional stability, so too am I hopeful that, as years and experience accumulate, I may continue to refine my ability to authentically appraise the stuff of life, to the point where, should the sweetest frame be swept from under me and everything else with it, I could still find the peace in wholly leaning on the stuff of faith.

—Renee Gehman, Souderton, Pennsylvania, is assistant editor, Dream-Seeker Magazine; high school teacher; and wrestles with how to handle stuff.



Becoming E-Families But Not Bodies in Vats

Michael A. King

It's time, Dad," my daughter Kristy said. "You need to get on Facebook." Soon there on Facebook, obedient if bewildered, I was.

Recently Jose and I went out to breakfast. Jose, younger than Kristy, fulminated against Facebook. And when people ask why he's late to a meeting, he told me, he informs them he doesn't track meetings set up by e-mail. Gatherings with family and friends appall Jose: everybody on cells and laptops tapping and thumbing and tweeting and text-text-texting away then looking up just long enough to be in photos uploaded instantly to Facebook so all around the world people at their respective gatherings can watch each other taking photo breaks from their tap-thumb-tweet-texting.

So there we have it. Millions plugged into the Internet hive, and it wouldn't surprise me to learn that, as in a science fiction movie, we're in vats being fed by robots while our brains feed us the illusion that we can still actually see, touch, hear, taste, smell a physical world.

I was resonating right along with Jose, righteously proud of never having learned to text on my prehistoric 2003 cell phone. This is why my daughters know to text me in such a way that I can use autorespond to send back either "Answer is yes" or "Answer is no."

Then I remembered the day my brothers and I were on our first trip ever with each other as adults. First thing we did at our B&B was pull out laptops. Pretty soon one brother was e-mailing photos of the trip to other brothers, cc. to our families so they could all be jealous of—I mean share in—our adventures. In a few minutes we started getting back alarmed messages from spouses and children loving the pictures but wondering if we really *were* in the same room e-mailing each other instead of talking.

Yes, it was sick. It was also fun to be in that room linked not only to each other but also family wherever any of us were. So now I'm confused. *Bad e-world!* I was thinking, with Jose. But maybe good e-world too?

Take my last birthday. I had half-forgotten it myself, but when I logged onto Facebook that morning, flooding in came "Happy Birthdays" from family and friends near and far, often farther than nearer, since many Facebook friends go back to college days or way way back. Some go back even to Triqueland in Mexico when I was a missionary kid and our family and theirs visited there in the Oaxaca

mountains of what was to them just home and to us a mystic land of fog and wonder.

I was embarrassed, given how ambivalent I am about Facebook, to realize what a glow those birthday wishes cast over my day. I couldn't quite believe I was catching myself thinking it, but I found the Hebrews 12:1 phrase "cloud of witnesses" running through my head. I felt surrounded that birthday by a Facebook cloud of witnesses. There were too many of them for me to remember, without looking at the list, who all of them were. Yet they represented such a cross-section of my relationships and life chapters past and present that I felt as if in some way they were all members, whether by blood or by faith and friendship and shared history, of one great extended e-family, cradling that day my entire life journey in supportive hands.

Jose is right. We *are* flirting with insanity as the e-world's tentacles spread everywhere. And maybe soon enough if not already our bodies will indeed lie in vats while our minds roam the universe.

I also can't quite shake the memory of our dear mother trying to pull us children from books out into fresh air. We just wanted our bodies to lie in the vats of their beds and maybe for Mom to feed the bodies sandwiches so our minds could roam book universes. Now books are those old-fashioned things threatened by the

I was embarrassed, given how ambivalent I am about Facebook, to realize what a glow those birthday wishes cast over my day.

e-world, which makes this book lover and publisher sad.

Yet books have themselves been blowing up pre-book cultural patterns for centuries. Researchers are even finding that reading physically rewires our brains, as the e-world surely does too. Books can be and do awful things. They can also bless us beyond measure.

We've learned to treat books as terrible and wonderful. I suspect we need to learn to treat the e-world the same way. So yes, when tap-thumb-tweet-text family and friends replace flesh-and-blood versions, tragedy is

afoot. Yet maybe our e-families too are in their way real ones, even ones within which God is at work as e-families connect and cross-connect and nurture each other until at last truly they form a worldwide e-cloud of witnesses.

—*Michael A. King, Telford, Pennsylvania, is publisher, Cascadia Publishing House LLC; Dean-Elect, Eastern Mennonite Seminary; and a Facebook friend. This reflection was first published in The Mennonite (February 2010), as a "Real Families" column.*

Copyrighted Earth

Upon receiving some of my poems,
my dad wondered if "the Lord" was in them.
It was like asking if God is in a Bach partita
or a roseate spoonbill or a sunset.

If God is Lord of all, as he would have it,
how could He not be in my poems?
But he meant, did I name his God?
Did I recognize Him as creator?
Did I respect His copyright?

—*Dale Bicksler*

My Car

Noël R. King

One morning last week, I heard my car talking to my neighbor's car, where they sat beside each other at the yard's edge. As I had not known my car could either think or talk, I paused unnoticed behind a large bush.

"Well, I'll tell you one thing," my old white car was pontificating, "I have more than a few good miles left in me, and I'll be swishjiggled if I stop one foot short of where the Good Lord says, 'Stop, Car.'"

"I know!" cried my neighbor's little blue truck, also dented, rusted, and with its own share of nicks and metal bruises. "It burns me up, my old lady talking junk this, trade that. I get so mad, it makes me vomit oil!"

I stayed behind the bush, transfixed by this unexpected opportunity to hear my car speak from the heart.

"She doesn't trust me anymore, is the problem," it was bemoaning when I tuned back in. "She thinks I'm gonna just fall apart now. It wasn't my fault that muffler fell off last week—the stupid mechanic forgot the clamps."

"She does check your oil a lot," the light blue truck agreed. "I'd say, just be glad she cares!"

"I guess so," my white car admitted, grudgingly.

“But she thinks I’m dumb, and I’m not. I’m smart! I know three languages!”

“You do?” whistled the little blue truck. “Really?”

“Yup,” said my car. “Made in Japan. First language. Six months in a German warehouse, second language. Then Baltimore in ‘91 to my first lady, American English. This here’s my second lady, starting from February ‘98. I wish you coulda seen me when I was still new. I smelled and looked so great!”

“You’re still pretty classy,” said the light blue truck. “I have always admired you. I have especially envied your four doors all these years. So roomy and accessible!”

“Ha,” said my car. “Sore and rheumy’s more like it; going on 19 years, these hinges. Throw me into a tub of WD-40 for a week—that’d get my hubcaps spinning again!”

“A car spa! Ha ha ha!” Light Blue Truck laughed, which kind of hurt my ears because it was so rusty sounding. “Hey, but isn’t it about time for her to come out and start you up? We better shut up. Have a great day!”

“You too,” said my white car. “Time to get to work! Watch out for those potholes down by the store. Word on the street says they took one of Marvin Mazda’s tires yesterday.”

I came around the bush a few moments later and said, “Good morning,

Cars! How are you today?”

I came around the bush a few moments later and said, “Good morning, Cars! How are you today?”

I detected no response from either of them, just like any other morning, although my car easily avoided all potholes on the way to work. I tried to find a Japanese station on the satellite radio to entertain it while we were driving back home that evening but was not successful.

Then, yesterday, when I came out in the morning, the frost on my car’s windshield could have been taken to spell out the word “Hi” if you had looked at it with some imagination.

“Well, hello to you, too, Car!” I said, but I didn’t receive any audible response. I guess my car is still one of few spoken words around the human element.

I opened the hood to check the oil. It is crucial to check that oil! As I reached for the dipstick, I saw a hose that had shifted to one side, and I took my baby in to get it all checked out.

“This hose is about to bust,” said the mechanic. “It gave you good warning.”

“I know,” I said. “My car may not be fresh off the line, but it sure is smart.”

—As circumstances warrant, through her Turquoise Pen column Noël R. King, Scottsville, Virginia, reports on strange and wonderful or worrisome things, including smart cars.





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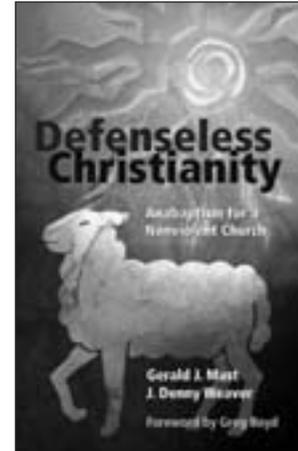
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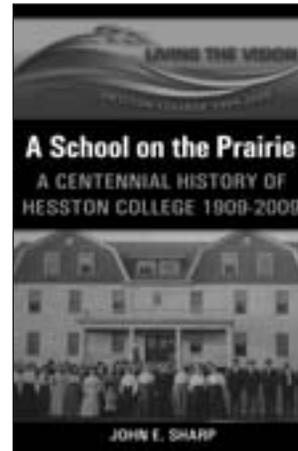
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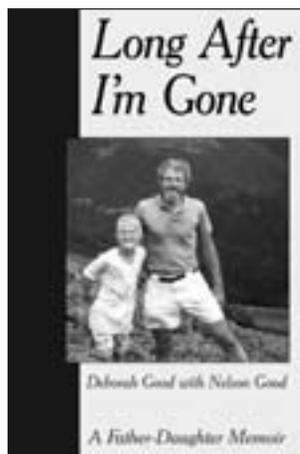
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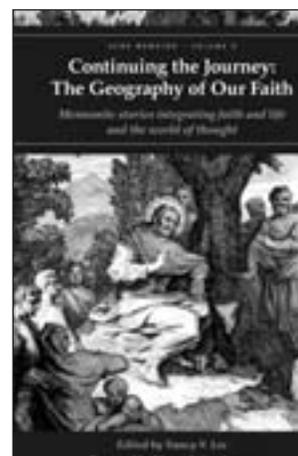
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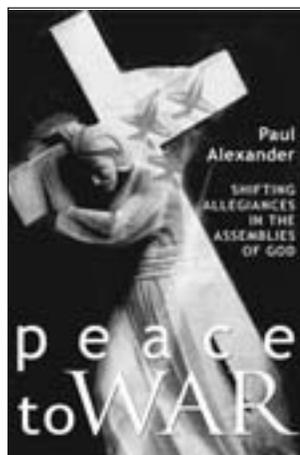
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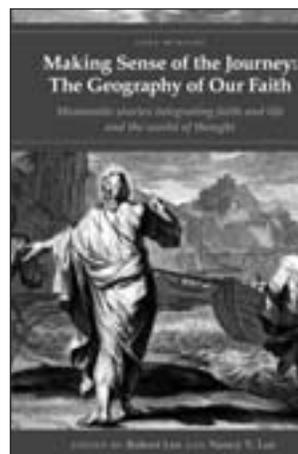
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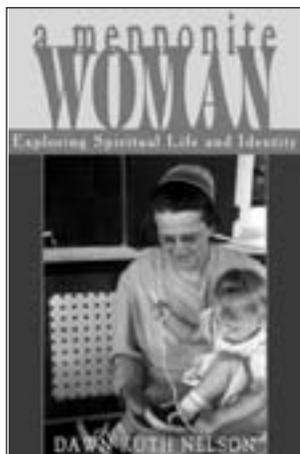
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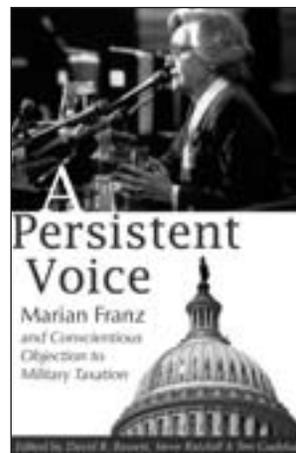


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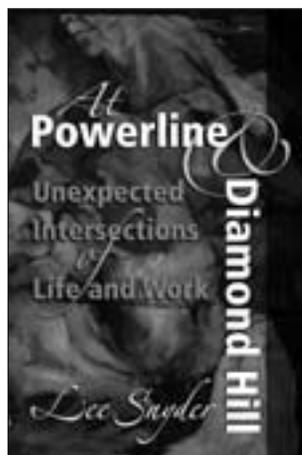


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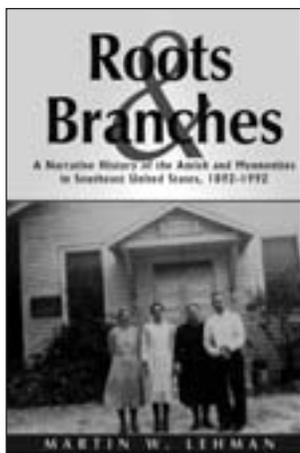
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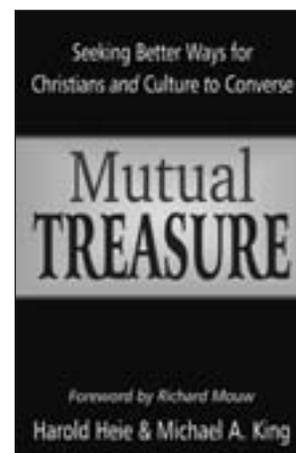


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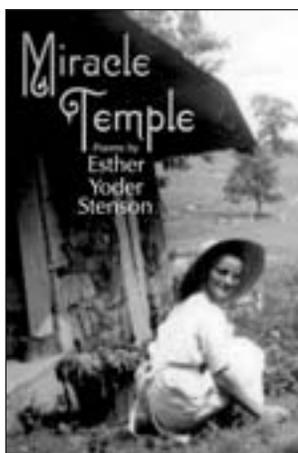


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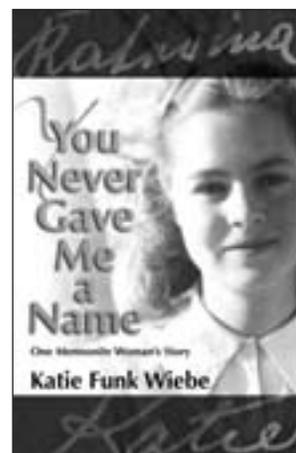


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Family Photographs

They used to be kept in scrapbooks
large unwieldy strung together pages
with four glued-in-place holders
at each corner of the photo.
The pages were black.
My mother had a single purpose pen
she dipped in white ink
to write

First Day of School
Fun on the Beach
Fishing Trip Success

so when you looked at the photo
and read the inscription
you caught a glimpse into a story
or at least a chapter of it.
“Wait! let me get a picture of that”
so the subjects pause for a moment
 in the horseshoe game
 or tossing the laughing toddler in the air
 or toasting marshmallows
and grin at the camera.

These were happy people doing happy things
and life stopped for an instant
 – click –
and then resumed.
Resumed with real life with worries about
where the money will come from to fix the furnace
and if Martha’s cough is just a cough
or—God forbid—TB.

Happy people doing happy things.

So why is it
looking at them now
I’m drenched in sadness?

—*Ken Gibble*