

# **D**reamSeeker Magazine

Voices from the Soul



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Craig Pelkey-Landis

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*On the Cusp of New Beginnings*

Deborah Good

*and much more*

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**Summer 2009**

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# Editorial: Shadows and Sunshine

As this issue of DSM is being finalized, the United States, as it has so often since 9-11, is wrestling yet again with how to treat enemies. We mostly seem to have resolved it's okay to kill them if they're bad enough. But we're still not quite sure it's okay to torture them, although apparently (according to a recent survey), a majority of more faithful churchgoing evangelical Christians do think torture is the way to go.

Even amid gauzy summer breezes, then, it seems important to think yet again about what we do with evil, with bad people, with Jesus' teachings to love even beyond what seems right to us. Dan Schreiber and Stephen Mitchell, who submitted their overlapping and mutually enriching articles without being aware of the other's, keep us pondering. My column on robins goes next because it worries about where God fits when robins are taken (which extends to when people are tortured).

Nevertheless, it is summer. During a recession. I at least yearn also to feel touched during summer by the magic of landscapes, laughter, the sheer joy of the moment. So next comes Renee Gehman, reminding us, precisely, to cherish the moment, which for me includes the summer sunshine, so soon gone, such a gift while here. Brenda Hartman-Souder

extends and deepens the theme with a meditation on, of all things, lice.

Then Craig Pelkey-Landis takes us to sun-dappled Phoenix. And Deborah Good ponders life on the cusp of "what-next" in various insightful ways and settings—but not least an Arizona road trip.

Ah, but this issue of DSM will remain current through September and the beginning of fall, when school starts and we expect minds to work hard. So onward with a thoughtful review by Dave Greiser of "The Soloist" and the com-

plexities of mental illness it both addresses and fails to address; by James Juhnke of "Silent Light" and the film's illuminating (sometimes) treatment of Old Order Mennonites; by Dan Hertzler of ways Marlene Epp "lifts the fog" in telling of the treatment and mistreatment of Mennonite women. The poets add their own dappling of light, longing, God leaving or lurking.

Finally I can't resist closing on a resurgent summery note, with Noël King's fantasy of what happens when a babysitter realizes she's taking care of Alison, daughter of *Wonderland* Alice.

Shadows and sunshine. Summer into autumn, 2009.

—Michael A. King

**Even amid gauzy summer breezes, then, it seems important to think yet again about what we do with evil. . . . Nevertheless, it is summer. . . .**



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## Longing

Consider the blackpoll warbler.

She tips the scales  
at one ounce  
before she migrates, taking off  
from the seacoast to our east  
flying higher and higher  
ascending two or three miles  
during her eighty hours of flight  
until she lands,  
in Tobago,  
north of Venezuela  
three days older,  
and weighing half as much.

She flies over open ocean almost the whole way.

Oh she is not so different from us.  
The arc of our lives is a mystery too.  
We do not understand,  
we cannot see  
what guides us on our way:  
that longing that pulls us toward light.

Not knowing, we fly onward  
hearing the dull roar of the waves below.

—*Julie Cadwallader-Staub grew up in Minnesota with her five sisters, her parents, and a dog beside one of Minnesota's small lakes. Her favorite words to hear growing up were, "Now you girls go outside and play." She now lives in Vermont and still loves to explore the natural world right out her back door.*

*Correction: The early hardcopy printings of DreamSeeker Magazine, Spring 2009, ran an incorrect byline for the poem "Kansas, My Home," p. 41. The correct byline should have been Elizabeth Ann Raid.*

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

# A Brief History of Love and Suffering

Dan Schreiber

**H**uman institutions, despite whatever good intentions they claim, seem inevitably to find ways to increase suffering in the world. Government has its bureaucracy, law its lawyers, and Microsoft its Windows®. But Christianity trumps them all, by demanding adherence to a concept that has caused more suffering than all other strategies combined: Loving our neighbors.

Love is supposed to be a good thing, of course. However, in those rare instances of right loving, it is often painful for the one doing the loving. Martin Luther King Jr., for example, loved his country into providing some measure of justice for African-Americans. He was rewarded with an early exit from his struggle to reflect God's kingdom on earth.

And in the more usual case of loving done badly, the suffering lands squarely on those being loved. European Christians loved their way across North America, attempting to convert the savages to everlasting life. They were not terribly successful at conversion, but they did manage to leave an efficient wake of death and devastation behind them. Love is indeed a battlefield, as the prophet Benatar once proclaimed.

In my own life, I've encountered many a Christian attempting to love me into seeing God their way. All too often, it ends in shouting, finger-wagging, or tears. And yet, my own love of neighbor demands that I offer in return some vital and sincere reflection of God's eternal wisdom. Not infrequently, this is met with the same stubborn resistance. Where did we go wrong?

Christian love started out well enough. Jesus urged us to love our neighbors as second only to loving God in our right-living priorities. He even helpfully pointed out who our neighbors are (Samaritans) and what we should do to love them (provide for them when they are mugged). He also recklessly included enemies as neighbors, and advocated social engineering in the form of feeding those who are hungry and clothing those who are naked.

Despite this promising start, loving our neighbors took a turn for the worse when Christians acquired power. The Roman emperor Constantine made Christianity the official state religion, so instead of waiting around for Samaritans to get mugged, Christians started patrolling the hills. This worked well for awhile, and not just for the Samaritans.

Eventually Christians grew restless with mere safety, and started mugging the Levites and priests because they weren't Christian. Loving neighbors became a very pro-active thing, and by the time there were no more Samaritans or Levites to love, Christians turned their attention to

the wider world to see who else was worthy of their affection.

Around the same time, St. Augustine invoked love of neighbor to inaugurate the Just War tradition. He made the reasonable claim that even though a Christian must turn the other cheek when struck, he is allowed to protect a neighbor when a second neighbor strikes the first one. Unfortunately, this has been interpreted rather broadly over the centuries. In practice it has now degenerated to the right of any Christian nation to invade any other nation if it contains a single person who has ever been slapped.

Thomas Aquinas gallantly tried to bring this under control by adding a bunch of restrictions, riders, and disclaimers to just war theory. However, benevolent kings and politicians are notoriously impatient with limits on their love. Thus, by my counting, just war has never prevented a war, but it has justified plenty of despicable ones. All in the name of love, to misquote the prophet Bono.

If loving our neighbors is so terrible, then why do we insist on doing it? The problem to any alternative, for those of us who claim to be Christian, is that love of neighbor is not an optional choice on the Christian menu of ethics. Love is not some tiny sprig of parsley next to the big, juicy pork chop of salvation. It isn't even the tasty applesauce. It is the heart of the gospel, which makes it the very meat on the bone. It may be hard to swallow when badly prepared, but eat it we must, if we are to be faithful. Vegetarians may disagree, but perhaps we

should not discount the possibility that vegetarians are damned.

Vegetarians aside, the solution isn't to stop loving our neighbors, but to do it better than we normally do. And it turns out that the problem with loving our neighbors is not the part where we care for our neighbors' physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. Providing aid and comfort to those in need and advocating justice for the oppressed are exactly what Jesus had in mind when he said to love each other.

No, the culprit is not love itself, but the seemingly infinite human capacity for self-delusion when deciding what is good for someone else. What we believe to be good for someone else usually coincides most conveniently with what is good for us, or our country, or our culture. How else to explain forced conversion by domination? Slavery? Trickle down economics?

It is time to take a hard-line approach to love. Our credibility is so damaged that we should not allow ourselves to invoke love as a motivation for helping others unless we physically, emotionally, or spiritually lose something in the process. We must prove our love, as the prophet Madonna once demanded (except maybe not quite in the way she suggests).

One good measure of the purity of our intentions would be to judge

whether our actions result in more power for the people we love, or more power for ourselves. Even though we might do good deeds that are worthwhile, and even succeed in making

**Our credibility is so damaged that we should not allow ourselves to invoke love as a motivation for helping others unless we physically, emotionally, or spiritually lose something in the process.**

others happy, we can't call it love unless it is painful and costly to ourselves. We may not need to literally hang on a cross for our love, but we do need to challenge the powers of the world for the benefit of others.

Sure, I am overstating it, but perhaps some loving radicalism is required at this point in history. Although mod-

ern Christians have grown more sophisticated in hiding our self-serving love, we nonetheless suffer from the same instincts. We love immigrants by letting them mow our lawns, cook our food, take care of our children. We love homosexuals by urging them to deny their identities to affirm our worldview. We love unborn babies enough to scold their mothers but not enough to provide for them after they emerge from the womb to the starkness of their world.

And of course there is still plenty of old-fashioned love to go around. We invade other countries to free them of tyranny while laying waste to their people, land, and culture—and conveniently ensuring ourselves access to the world's oil supply.

Last but not least, what of writers like this one, who rebuke others regarding their shortcomings in their attempts

to love? What of those who lecture one-sidedly on their tradition's sometimes sad history of love of suffering? Those who bind heavy burdens onto the backs of others while lifting only their fingers to type behind the warm comfort and glow of their computer monitors? Woe unto them, I say, for they have already received their reward, often in the form of a small check, for which they are indeed grateful.

In fact, writers who demand an uncompromising stance on love may cause us to abandon any attempt at it. We may fear that we will get it wrong and shame ourselves. And yet, fear not. There is no doubt we will continue to get it wrong.

Despite our most sincere efforts, our spiritual descendants will shake their heads in dismay at how we could be so blind to the plight of others, just as we shake our heads at the past follies of some of our spiritual ancestors. We just have to hope that God's grace is indeed infinite. We must love boldly and therefore sin boldly, and have faith that God will forgive us our sins, since history is not likely to.

—*Dan Schreiber is a freelance writer from Champaign, Illinois. He enjoys rebuking himself and others, but mostly others, on his blog at <http://danschreiber.blogspot.com>*



## On the Edge of the Razor

Stephen Mitchell

**T**his morning I cut myself shaving. Usually, I'm quite careful with my razor. It's a safety razor—one of those grocery store luxury items that are supposed to conform to the contours of my face. But this morning my hand slipped. Lucky for me the blades are small, so they didn't cut deeply. Razors can though. Why else would both surgeons and cutthroats wield them?

In the 2003 film *Luther*, which I saw only recently, a peculiar scene occurs between the title character and his spiritual father. As Luther prepares to stand trial for his writings, Staupitz, recalling the social upheaval caused by Luther's writings, warns him to love good more than he hates evil. Meanwhile, with precision and grace, he shaves Luther's neck.

I've mulled over those words the last several weeks, turned them this way and that, tried them on like spectacles to see if they would help make clear what had before been fuzzy. What, I've asked, is the difference between loving good and hating evil? Doesn't the love of the one imply, yea even demand, hatred of the other? Shouldn't we be capable of both? Perhaps. But the sentiment that leads will bring us to radically different ends. The danger lies, I think, in the power of

hatred to overwhelm all other emotions.

Andreas Karlstadt,\* Luther's colleague at the University of Wittenberg, provides a compelling example. Impressed by Luther's theses, he supported him in his opposition to religious corruption. Allied with this religious corruption was a political system that oppressed the peasants. There was evil in this religious-political system, an evil that needed to be changed. But hatred of evil overcame Karlstadt; he turned radical revolutionary and led the peasants to outrageous act of violence which led to reprisals by the authorities, who slaughtered thousands of peasants.

In Karlstadt's hand the razor slipped, or perhaps he slipped on it. Reform became for him a revolutionary tightrope stretched over a valley of bones and sharp rocks. When he fell, the razor cut deeply, severing his life and the lives of those who followed.

**A**s I look at my own world, I find it chillingly similar to Luther's. Of course, we've no medieval church selling indulgences; we do, however, live in a world of abundant evil. From terrorism to torture, from racism to genocide, from poverty to imperialism, we need not look far to find injustices worthy of hatred. It is, in fact, quite satisfying to hate evil, to point out the failings of those in power, to denounce the oppressor. We might even need such activism to remain moral people. Too quickly though, we can be left with little but outrage which too soon becomes overwhelming hatred.

Consider our very recent history. What, if not an overwhelming hatred of perceived evil, could have led our nation which prided itself on liberty and justice for all to build, deploy, and explode weapons of mass destruction in the name of defending freedom from tyranny? What, if not hatred of the evils of our capitalism, could have persuaded the Soviets to do the same?

And consider the contemporary scene. What, if not an all consuming hatred of perceived evil, could convince the bin Laden's of this world to turn airliners into missiles and bodies into bombs? What but an overwhelming hatred of evil could lead men to consider the torture of terrorists a legitimate act? Is it possible that nations and groups on both sides of the war on terror are acting more from hatred of evil than from love of good?

In literature too, we find examples. Ivan Karamazov, the intellectual of the *Brother's Karamazov*, hated evil. But this hatred led him to complicity in the murder of his father.

The opposing ideologies of the two sides suggest further that identifying and responding to evil is a dangerous, difficult, and perplexing task. In addition to the risk that hatred will overwhelm us, there is the clear and present danger of calling the wrong thing evil—or failing to see our own.

**I**s it possible that Jesus understood just how difficult it is to tell good from evil? Did he know that love of good and hatred of evil, though standing as close as the blade-width of a razor, lead in radically different directions? Could this knowledge have moti-

vated him, at least partly, to tell some of those puzzling stories in the Gospels? Could this difficulty help to explain why he said that the great commandment is to love God, followed by love of neighbor? Could he have placed these two side by side, so close together that no razor could divide them, because he knew that the first separated from the second would lead professed lovers of God to slaughter their fellow humans?

When the rich young ruler affirmed his faithfulness to the "shalts" and "shalt nots" of the law, Jesus told him to sell his goods and give the money to the poor. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus said nothing about hunting down the thieves and bringing them to justice; he merely praised the good works of the Samaritan.

In the story of the Publican and the Pharisee at prayer, the difference emerges again, razor-thin but terribly important. The Pharisee disdains (dare I say hates?) the Publican—probably for good reason—while the Publican yearns for the goodness of forgiveness. Jesus leaves no question about whom we are to imitate.

Could not this difference—between love of good and hatred of evil—provide a sliver of light to help us penetrate the mysteries of the Sermon on the Mount? What, if not love of good, could compel us to turn the other cheek? What, if not love of good, could lead us to bind up the wounds of the oppressed? What but this same love could compel us to visit

those sick or in prison? What but the love that is the greatest of all good things could lead a man to accept death at the hands of his enemies rather than to strike back in violence and hatred?

I cannot claim that Luther or his followers fully succeeded in loving good. At times they may even have embraced evil. In his later writings, I recall, Luther wrote hatefully of the Jews, and he responded to Karlstadt's peasant uprising by advocating for violent reprisal. Perhaps the bloodiest slip of the razor occurred when much of the German church acquiesced to Hitler.

As a worshiper in a Lutheran congregation, I can attest that we still struggle to love good more than we hate evil. But Staupitz's advice is sound. It is not simple nor easy to let love rather than hate lead. But to do otherwise is to let the razor slip. Our volatile world and the blood in my sink suggest we dare not be so careless.

\*My use of Andreas Karlstadt is based upon his presentation in the film. The historical debate surrounding his purported violence and the possibility that the character might have been merged with the historical Thomas Muentzer is noted but not crucial to the argument of this article.

**As a worshiper in a Lutheran congregation, I can attest that we still struggle to love good more than we hate evil.**

—*Stephen Mitchell lives with his wife and two children in an old house in Mount Holly, North Carolina, where he teaches English, reads, gardens, and puzzles endlessly over the challenges of living peaceably.*

## When Something Takes the Babies

Michael A. King

She pulled out dry grass. Then she hopped into a bush to weave it in. Alerted to the new construction project, all of us kept tabs on it and celebrated as the robin, joined often by her mate, completed a fine round condo. Soon four eggs, colored, yes, “robin’s-egg blue,” nestled in it.

She began sitting duties. To avoid unsettling her, mostly we watched from afar. Except when she’d leave we’d allow ourselves to gaze right into the nest built just inches from a window. We also took in the dramas that erupted when bad birds or squirrels drew too near.

At last the big day: nest turns maternity ward. Commotion everywhere. Soon arrives an image that seems almost cliché come to life: Papa or Mama with fat worm dangling.

Then: tragedy. Nest empty. No little birds. A very bad thing has befallen the robin family. Deflation hits our human family.

Just one more nest emptied by a predator. Just one more reminder of how truly nature is, as Alfred Lord Tennyson famously put it, “red in tooth and claw.” But the nest had seemed so alive, its bird family such a

sign of spring, new beginnings, the ability of even tiny brains to prepare for, give birth to, care for children! It was hard not to ponder what to make of the stillness and its mute testimony to the reality that things go not only right but also often wrong.

I wondered what this might say about human families. And I found my mind wandering toward all the torn pieces in those many circles of family radiating back from and in front of me. I thought of that shotgun ending a life in that pasture. Of that broken pelvis leading to the meningitis that killed her when, as taking the meds became once more a struggle, she jumped out her window. Of the predisposition toward anxiety and depression that seems to run through generation after generation in one family wing. Of those who once to a child seemed giants yet have been felled by strokes, cancer, dementia.

I thought of how often over the years I’ve heard from or about those suffering faith crises when the trust that “God will take care of you,” as Civilla and Walter Martin put it in their gospel song, smashes into the reality that this woe, that frailty, the relentless winding down age brings will end at a graveside ceremony where those gathered will seek assurance that God does still take care.

And I thought this: If faith is to be worth much at all, then it needs to face squarely the predations both robins and people face. Does faith pass the test? Often not. We keep faith

alive by telling ourselves stories of the times it seems God does care and not telling of the times God seems not to care. I will confess to being tempted to leave church in anger when I hear one

**I know which answers to the riddle of vacant nests and a caring God leave me feeling empty myself. I don’t know how to solve the riddle.**

more account of how, amid the bodies mangled by this accident or that disease, the one giving testimony was miraculously spared by a loving God. Yes? So God was on lunch break when the babies were stolen?

I know which answers to the riddle of vacant nests and a caring God leave me feeling empty myself. I don’t know how to solve the riddle. In fact, I’d guess it can’t be solved. I protest simplistic evocations of God’s care. Yet does it get us any farther to commit to faith in “Life’s a [word not appropriate for *DreamSeeker Magazine*] and then you die”? Plus it so happens “Be not dismayed what’er betide,” the first line of the Martins’ song, can draw my tears.

And what am I or we to make of this: In delving into the history of “God Will Take Care of You,” I learned that Civilla also wrote another favorite, “His Eye Is on the Sparrow.” But not robins, right?

Except Civilla isn’t quite so easily dismissed: She wrote “Sparrow” after visiting the Doolittles, one of them long bedridden, the other confined to a wheelchair. Yet brightness surrounded them. When asked why, reported Civilla, Mrs. Doolittle said simply that “His eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me.”

A day after I found the nest empty, two robins scrambled off the roof near the nest. Down to the lawn to pull at worms they flew. If they were the bereft parents, God's eye on their children hadn't spared them. I doubt their robin theology was better than mine at making sense of that riddle. Still amid death they were alive. I dared hope that if not in the answers they

and I don't have, then at least in our riddles God lurks.

—*Michael A. King, Telford, Pennsylvania, is publisher, Cascadia Publishing House LLC; editor, Dream Seeker Magazine; and a pastor and speaker. This reflection was first published in The Mennonite (June 2, 2009), as a "Real Families" column.*

## Countdowns and Clock-Watching

Renee Gehman

**I** always seem to be waiting for beginnings and ends. Things are never quite satisfactory in the middle, in the now, where I see things as they are, including their imperfections or what is missing. I see the potential perfection of beginnings and ends that lie ahead, which I imagine as holding a beauty like the world right after a snowfall, before anyone has set foot on anything.

When I'm not happy with the present, it becomes little more than a traffic jam I must endure until I reach my destination. But "Life is a journey, not a destination," I've heard. Why is it so impossible to live knowing that sometimes? I mean really knowing that. That which has yet to happen often seems so much more important than that which is happening now. And so I am in Vietnam, having the hugest experience in my life thus far, and I'm appreciating it, but still, I can't help but daydream about the reunions to come in the summer. Then, I think, then everything will be okay. Except once I'm home everything will be okay once I have a job, and once I have a job everything will be okay once I have a husband, or children, or a master's degree, and so on and so forth until the only thing I want to do before I die is make a return trip to my beloved Vietnam. —January 16, 2007

### Molly

Her twisted body sentenced her to wheelchair and bed but could not exile delight.

My visits, few enough, it's true, were welcomed as if she really did remember who I was.

What I learned about her was sketchy, episodic, told in bursts like a four-year-old.

Talking cost her effort, her voice raspy, her face red. She preferred talking to listening.

It was her chance to shine, to be someone of consequence. I learned to listen.

She guided me into and through the fifty years of her contracted world.

I found, to my surprise, a place absent of complaint or fear or sulk or rage.

And when, about to go, I'd say, each time, would you like a prayer? Her face lit up.

I'd say a line, "Our Father who art . . ." and wait to hear her echo.

Then, half-way through, remembering, she'd race ahead to "trespass against us."

I wondered what she knew of trespass, hers or others, what need she had of forgiveness.

And then we came to what I still remember most. Her eyes squeezed shut,

her fervency fervent, she prayed ". . . and lead us into temptation. Amen."

And I wonder if, maybe, her version makes as much sense as the original.

—*Ken Gibble*

I like to read old journal entries to see how I have changed, but it is also humbling to see how I have *not* changed where perhaps I should have. I had to chuckle when I read that excerpt the other night, because here I am over two years later, pining for the summer again, this time as a high school teacher eager for a break. Once again, I am having a great life adventure (first-year teaching), and once again, I must admit to counting down the days to its end.

**Once again, I am having a great life adventure (first-year teaching), and once again, I must admit to counting down the days to its end.**

Last night I sat outside with my laptop to plan lessons, but a young guest at a party next door caught my eye. It was Alex, whom I'd had in my first class as a child care teacher after returning from Vietnam. Alex was in the neighbor's backyard, throwing a giant Frisbee around by himself while everyone else ate on the deck. He didn't bother himself with trying to catch the thing but rather launched it haphazardly into the air and then ran around (also haphazardly) and dove upon the ground, synchronizing his own fall with the Frisbee's.

From afar I watched him: he was completely invested in his simple game, oblivious to the smells of grilled food and the sounds of happy conversation coming from just a few feet away. He was busy living in this moment.

Eventually I walked over to the fence and yelled his name. He looked up, his face glowing with that beautiful mischievous grin, and I said, with

mock-accusation, "How come you never come over to *my* house to visit?!"

As I spoke he sprinted across the yard with his arms outstretched for a hug. "I'm FIVE!" he said excitedly as I lifted him into my arms, making the obligatory declaration about his increased size.

His mom came over too, told me the center had hosted the Family Night that week, on Tuesday, and that beforehand Alex had asked her if she thought I would be there. Last year I'd chased him around a lot, him and his buddies. I was living in the moment then too.

Now as I held Alex, he rotated his arms, displaying for me his various temporary tattoos, mostly featuring cars. His hair was still as blonde as could be, his cheeks still rosy.

Memories crept up on me. I remembered once—if I dare tell a story that reflects well on me amid others that don't!—his mom had reported to me that he'd told her at home, "Mommy I just love Miss Renee. Not as much as I love you, but I really love her." And I remembered the time we were lined up to go outside at school when he pointed at a "wet floor" sign by the bathroom and said, "I can read what that sign says."

"Oh yeah? What does it say?"

"It says: You cannot come in this bathroom right now because Mr. George is cleaning it."

I remembered how he used to get himself in trouble at nap time. He didn't want to sleep, so instead of lying

quietly and resting, which was the boring alternative, he would bounce up and down on his cot or kick his feet as fast as he could in the air, or throw his stuffed animal up in the air and catch it. Even when he wasn't happy with his circumstances, Alex still lived in the moment.

I appreciate now the way Alex continued to make the most of his time, finding ways to have fun even when it seemed like there was no fun to be had. I suppose he was too young for staring at the clock and counting down the minutes.

### *Eastern Towhee*

The book says they are common in this part of the world.  
But I've been living in this part of the world for more than six decades and yesterday was the first time I saw one.  
Or maybe not.  
Maybe you have to be looking, maybe you have to be hoping, to see one.

Some say that only those who loved him were able to see Christ risen.  
Maybe he too is common in this part of the world.

—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.

The hardest times are also the hardest times to live in the moment. And why shouldn't they be? Why shouldn't we look forward to better times when things get tough? It seems a healthy enough sequence of cause-and-effect to me. Still, Alex reminds me to discipline my countdowns and clock-watching so I too can live his in-the-moment joys.

—Renee Gehman, assistant editor, DreamSeeker Magazine, and high school teacher, is counting down the days until she is better at living in the moment on a daily basis.

## Lousy Gifts

Brenda Hartman-Souder

“My head itches!” exclaimed Valerie, for the umpteenth time that evening. We were watching “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?” our special Friday night activity. Our seven-year-old loves to try and answer the questions correctly. She relishes making a decision with the contestants and yelling, “Final answer!” to her selection. But that night she was distracted by an itchy scalp.

Greg had also been scratching his head for several weeks. We’d taken a perfunctory look and found nothing. Mark, my calm, unruffled spouse, concurred that Greg, at age three, was just developing a little nervous habit akin to the nail biting or hair twirling of his sister.

But as Val complained, my mind flickered to my own head. It’d been sort of itchy too, but I thought I was just getting used to winter’s dry air and wearing hats again. I put Val face down on my lap, parted her hair with my fingers and examined her scalp.

Tiny brown bugs were rushing to hide in the dark recesses of my daughter’s shiny, clean hair. With a rush of dread and determination, I extracted one of the sesame-seed-sized buggers and dashed downstairs where Mark was placidly washing the dishes.

“We’ve got lice!” I shouted, showing him the evi-

dence, a tiny, dark, now motionless dot on my finger.

“Are you sure that’s what it is?” he asked. Then he shrugged and returned to his scrubbing. Denial and minimization have always been his strong suits. But I knew. I knew it was lice. Final answer.

I raced to the computer, Googled “lice” and acquired a quick education.

Lice, although harmless, are tough to get rid of. Persistence is the key. They are not partial to poor heads, rich heads, dirty heads, or spotless heads. Lice exist in three stages, and all must be eradicated.

Standard, over-the-counter, chemical treatments as well as natural remedies exist; many make claims which, as we launched our all-out effort to get rid of lice, I found to be less than honest. Treatment might kill off the full grown louses and new born nymphs. (Funny, I always thought of a nymph as a beautiful maiden; not a wiggling insect ready to suck blood.) The nits, egg sacks attached to hair follicles at the scalp, however, are usually impervious to the prescribed insecticide and must be methodically combed or pulled out.

In short, our science-savvy world has not found an easy solution to the problem of head lice. Like Mark said, “We can put a man on the moon, but we can’t find a cure for lice.” I’m thinking that a man on the moon with a head full of bloodsucking critters might get the ball rolling on a cure.

**But I was wrong about lice’s meaningless existence. Lice do more than merely promoting panic or chronic itching.**

I quickly summarized that lice have no good reason for existence whatsoever other than to drive people crazy with itching and to propel mothers of the world into near hysterical actions to get rid of them. Which is what I proceeded to do.

That was dozens of loads of laundry ago, washing bedding and clothing in hot, soapy water, then drying it completely and scorchingly dry.

That was several trips to the pharmacy ago, to buy over-the-counter treatments and the best lice comb.

That was a dozen phone calls ago, to warn friends and others with whom we’d come in contact recently.

That was one “mayonnaise-all-over-the-head treatment” (guaranteed to suffocate the buggers) ago.

That was countless hours of parting, sectioning, and combing out live lice and nits, ago.

That was almost eight weeks ago.

**B**ut I was wrong about the meaningless existence of lice. Lice do more than merely promoting panic or chronic itching.

“Well, we are going to get to know each other very well,” I remember saying when we were first massaging the chemicals into our scalps, when we could choose to either laugh or cry that our lives were abruptly upended by this miniscule, harmless little bug that strikes fear in the eyes of even the most calm parent. (Which by the way, I’m not!)

All that's been true and, yes, it's been a gift. Forced to slow down, we spent more than the usual amount of time together. Every night, we combed hair. We nitpicked. And I learned new things about my family and myself.

Valerie, I discovered, as she sat at my feet reading the magical mystery of Harry Potter aloud while being combed, is a good little reader. And more, she's a good little philosopher, with thoughtful comments and questions about good and evil, about life, about recognizing things that are true in fiction. Toward the end of our ordeal, Val started to ask for "combing time," so she could sit and read to me.

Greg resolutely refused to be combed unless given a snack to munch on. Although he seemed oblivious to what was going on, he understood a lot more than we gave him credit for.

"I have bugs in my hair," he quipped with a little grin to an elderly woman who took the time to say hello to him at the supermarket. She briskly moved her cart down aisle; I hope she was hard of hearing.

I learned that my laid-back and calm spouse could readily spring to action and ably help with the extra chores of laundry, vacuuming, and combing. And that although he is impervious to much upset, his scalp is sensitive. He really, really hated to have the tangles in his hair pulled.

And I unearthed my own prejudice. While intellectually I knew that lice, like rain, can "fall on the just and the unjust," deep down I was embarrassed our family contracted lice. And

a part of me persisted in believing, on a deeply rooted level, that they were bestowed on us by someone poor, or with less than stellar hygiene.

**T**he focus of our lives narrowed during the season of lice. While I can't say I'm sad they are gone, I do look back on that period fondly. For in addition to discovering new things about myself and my family, I also learned a bit more about living in, accepting and embracing the present moment, whatever it hands me.

Charlotte Joko Beck, in *Everyday Zen*, writes "[T]he joy of our life is just in totally doing and just bearing what must be borne, in just doing what has to be done" (HarperOne, 2007, p. 68). For us that translated into combing and pulling, into nitpicking. If you didn't get each nit off before they hatched, newborn nymphs would grow into egg-laying lice and the cycle would repeat itself. Which it did, at first, because, well, I mentally wandered off to make a grocery list or dream about comb-free evenings.

Until now I thought a nitpicker was someone too focused on detail, someone who values method and technique over people, pure fact and logic over feeling and intuition. Like one of my writing instructors, who went over every assignment with, ahem, a fine-tuned comb, picking out even questionable errors but also all the passion and joy with which I'd written.

I used the term for people who magnify the minute because they are not mature enough to handle the broader, more complex picture. Al-

though this may capture some essence of the word, nitpicking has taken on a whole new meaning. It no longer just means "minute and unjustified criticism" according to the dictionary. Nitpicking also conveys focused and totally justified living in the present.

I began to develop a real appreciation for those detail-oriented people who will stop at nothing but a perfection they actually believe exists. Because until we stopped at nothing less than zero bugs and nits, we were doomed. And it was only as we slowed down and nitpicked and combed with utmost concentration, as we learned to submit to the tedious, time-consuming task of attending to each strand of hair, that we started to turn the corner on getting the critters out of our heads and home.

That's the gift I need over and over again. The tasks of work and household, ornery kids, troublesome relationships, stubborn problems, crises, and the complexities of life all exist in the present, and they always will. Only as I turn to what's in this moment, accept it, and attend to it can I see what is precious, even holy in daily life.

**It was only as we slowed down . . . that we started to turn the corner on getting the critters. . . .**

Maybe nitpicking is even a twenty-first century equivalent to biblical foot washing; a little wet, a little messy, not that enjoyable, but an essential act of service which has the power to shake up and even transform our modern ideas about what is really important.

I, however, usually spend all my present moments wishing, planning, and preparing for some great future moment, yearning to get out of my present problems. And of course I'm always disappointed. Because, well, wherever I go, there I am!

Lice at least temporarily interrupted that. They forced me attend to what was literally getting under my skin right now. They demanded I live in the present. It's all any of us have anyway, nits and all.

As the host of "Millionaire" states when the contestant has thirty seconds to ask a friend to help answer a question, "Your time begins now."

Final answer.

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



## A Funky Sunset Rainbow

Craig Pelkey-Landis

I'm sure the sun bore down on the water, refracting like a crystal charm dangling from somebody's rearview mirror. It was the Valley of the Sun, so what the sun was doing was a foregone conclusion. But I don't remember really.

Phoenix in those days was hot yet languid, on its way to being grandiose and sprawling, spilling out of nowhere onto the receptive desert, over the dry river beds, around chalky-pink mountains, drowning a swath of cholla, saguaro, and prickly pear cactus. The desert will surely drink it back up someday, but the spill is in stop-frame right now, and we were even closer to the beginning of the film loop back then.

Things were starting to get out of hand, but it was still a sleepy town of maybe 800,000 souls, depending how broadly you defined "metro Phoenix"—did Chandler count? Buckeye? The boom started in the raging days of automobile monoculture, so human scale got hosed. We became creatures of endless strip malls and mile after mile of subdivision housing. We were a puddle not yet stagnant, teeming with life.

So the sun was there in force, and we were pacing ourselves, Tim and I. Tim's house was where we hung out.

He had built a quarter pipe that backed up to the garage—I could never get up enough speed on my clunky Zorlac Craig Johnson model skateboard that felt like a water logged two-by-eight compared to the boards today. Even back then, Tim's Santa Cruz was like a ballet slipper next to the Zorlac. Nothing nimble about that Zorlac. We'd ride from the end of the cul-de-sac onto Tim's driveway, but the sloping curb would slow me down. I wasn't a poser exactly, but never made it to the top of the quarter pipe, never came close to doing an ollie or whatever tricks were called in 1983.

And that was just the front yard. Tim's family had cable, so we watched MTV, read back issues of *Reggae and African Beat*, and made banana fritters in his kitchen—Irie, Mon!

No, it's not what you imagine, teenage boys turning the kitchen into a war zone (that was Jeff's house, but we had nothing to do with the wreckage in that kitchen, and it's another story altogether). We were serious about those fritters, frying them up perfect golden brown, putting the flour, sugar, and other ingredients away after we had used them, washing the mixing bowl, all the while laughing and badly singing something like "We'll be Forever Lovin' Jah." We left Carl's Jr. burger wrappers all over the front porch, but the kitchen we left sparkling. Banana fritters were a religious experience that summer.

That summer, we divided our time between Carl's Jr., Tim's house,

the occasional punk rock show with at least five bands on the bill (with names like the Meat Puppets, The Sun City Girls, and my personal favorite: Jodie Foster's Army), and when we had a set of wheels, Zia Records, for cheap used albums.

**I remember feeling elation that day, water lapping all around me as I floated on an inner tube.**

Today was a Tim's house day. We were easing our way between skating, TV, and the pool. The development Tim's house was in had microscopic backyards with high stucco fences. The entire backyard was taken up by the pool. Like I said, we were pacing ourselves that day, not a thing to do. I didn't have a shift that day at the bottom rung of a storefront telemarketing operation. I wouldn't have many shifts there, as it turned out. Those folks flew the coop before I could cash my first paycheck.

We were just hanging by the pool at this point in the afternoon, the summer between junior and senior year. College was in the plans, but those plans wouldn't be enough to fit on the inside of a matchbook. So we watched the water glisten (I imagine), and listened to lousy radio, in those days before indie rock got airplay anywhere but two-block frequency college stations.

I remember feeling elation that day, water lapping all around me as I floated on an inner tube. Something halfway decent must have come onto the radio, Bowie or maybe even The Clash. Elation doesn't come when you listen to Journey or Loverboy.

It was my last carefree day, and knowing that, I enjoy the memory of

it all the more. Not long after this day, I moved with my parents to Pennsylvania, to a different kind of suburbia, north of Philadelphia. I think my memories of Phoenix have caused a sense of place, or the lack thereof, to thrum on low reverb from back to front to back in my consciousness. The American Southwest—wind scoured lowlands against mountains coming as if out of nowhere, the odd tumbleweed now and then, a certain awe for Almighty-ness in the rock formations and evidence of the forces of nature on the overall landscape—now there's a landscape that offers a sense of place. This is juxtaposed against the bland sameness of the strip-mall strewn landscape.

Thanks to that bland sameness, Phoenix did not, from the perspective of a punkish kid, have a very strong sense of identity. Back then I didn't feel a "Phoenix" identity, but I was pretty sure I had an idea of what Phoenix was not. It was not the la-la land of L.A. It didn't have the animist spiritual hum associated with Santa Fe. Not as naughty as Vegas. It wasn't even as distinctive as other towns in Arizona: not the home of hardcore granola types, like Flagstaff. Not the groovy Mestizo culture of Tucson. Just plain vanilla Phoenix. It was a place to move to and get an okay job and soak up the sun.

And yet as I look back, identity has seeped into my bones as a child of the southwest, a reverse migrator from that very specific place smack dab(ish) in the middle of the Arizona

desert. I think this rootedness I feel in Phoenix is something more than what human ingenuity has put into it. You can plop down a Bennigan's and a Don Pablo's, a Fry's grocery and a Woody's Macayo every square mile, but you can't escape the landscape. Squaw Peak, Camelback, the dry Salt River bed, South Mountain, the White Tank mountains to the west, they are not just dry bones, they put some flesh and feeling into Phoenix, they don't let us sit around. They beckon us to climb them, they become a jagged frame for the dust and smog induced, mind-bogglingly beautiful sunsets. They give this place a soul. They still stir my soul.

The sprawling, morphing exurb; the sunshine; endless miles of concrete to skate, beauty to be found if you spied a break in the numbing order of beige houses/beige strip mall/beige houses; people who held the capacity to relax once they were off the roads (highways were mayhem, just like anywhere else); great Mexican and Thai, and Japanese food; a million ways to cool off; a vibe that's too snide to be effervescent, but too pleased with life to be totally jaded. This is what has shaped me in my blood and bones. This is a funky sunset rainbow of brown, turquoise, blood orange, hazy dazzling purple. This is my town.

—Craig Pelkey-Landes, *Perkasie, Pennsylvania, who hasn't been to Arizona in ages, and who is glad the kids of Perkasie have a skateboard park.*

## On the Cusp of New Beginnings

Deborah Good

**F**or nearly all of the last two years, I have been immersed in graduate school, an endeavor that has been part vivification, part drudgery.<sup>1</sup> I will graduate in August, and as I march toward that end, I feel on the cusp of new beginnings. Having recently finished a statistics course that nearly burned me out every week, I am compelled to write this in mathematical terms:

Ends + Beginnings = Transitions.

Yes, transitions. The past seven years of my life have been full of them. How many times since college have I asked myself, *What next?*<sup>2</sup>

This question has often been accompanied by a daunting list of related questions, which have sometimes threatened to stall me out altogether: *Who am I? What is good and important in the world? What are my strengths and weaknesses, and what does the world need? What is the right thing to do, the most conscientious way to live, the life decisions I should make now so that I will achieve perfection within twenty years? And—oh yeah—how am I going to pay the rent and grocery bills?*

I have found that staring out car windows can nudge my thoughts down this pensive and somewhat treacherous path, as can large expanses of desert, red

rocks, and sky. As it turned out, a few days after walking across the stage in a premature<sup>3</sup> graduation ceremony, I sat in the passenger seat of a car driving through eastern Arizona. You guessed it: Car window + Red rocks + Desert + Sky = Pondering life direction.

Perhaps not everyone turns their year-to-year transitions into existential dilemmas as I do, but I have a hunch that I am not alone. This time around, I have decided to undertake an investigation of sorts. I am on the lookout for stories and pieces of wisdom on how we craft our ways of living and how we pay the bills and indeed whether and how the two are linked.

**M**ary Catherine Bateson, author of *Composing a Life*, believes all of us are artists, simply in the ways we put together our days. “As you get up in the morning, as you make decisions, as you spend money, make friends, make commitments, you are creating a piece of art called your life,” she writes.<sup>4</sup>

And if our lives are pieces of art, then the process of composing them is much more like sculpting a ball of clay or piecing together a patchwork quilt than choosing the correct answer on a multiple choice quiz. There is no one right way to do it.

As I gazed out the car window at the rocky valleys of eastern Arizona, I realized how easily I can limit myself by thinking that life should ulti-

mately lead to a traditional middle-class adulthood, involving a full-time career, a spouse, a house, a tidy yard, and investment plans.<sup>5</sup> I have joked with my younger brother that he has already far surpassed me in “adult points”—he is married, has a dog, a steady job, and as of May, a house with two brand new couches.

I am not suggesting, of course, that no one should marry, own a house, or mow their lawn. I simply want to remind myself that this is not the *only* way to reach adulthood.

I turned to Julie, the driver, who has been a good friend since my junior year of college. I wondered out loud with her about people we know—many of them artists and activists—who have crafted alternative work lives and living arrangements. These are people who don’t quite follow the rules—maybe because a traditional middle-class lifestyle would cost more money than they make, or maybe because they dislike rules generally. I have at times counted myself among them, on both accounts.

We talked about Julie’s husband, Jeremy, who writes, teaches at the local university, and does some editing to supplement the downtimes teaching, while Julie works as a nurse at the hospital and considers massage school. They grow some of their own fruit and vegetables, eat an occasional rooster and the eggs their chickens lay in a backyard coop, and harvest free desert foods like cacti pads and jackrabbit!

**And if our lives are pieces of art, then . . . composing them is much more like sculpting a ball of clay . . . than choosing the correct answer. . . .**

We talked about a friend of theirs who spends part of the year working for a sculptor in New York and the rest of the year in Tucson doing his own artwork and taking on carpentry jobs for friends.<sup>6</sup>

I also learned of another friend of a friend who spent a year eating granola bars and sleeping in a janitor’s closet at the recreation center where he worked to save thousands of dollars in rent and grocery money. Today, he is traveling in South America, living on the savings he accumulated during his closet-and-granola-bar existence.

There’s also my cousin, who has sometimes spent months traveling the country with friends by catching rides on trains and in cars, playing music on street corners, and living on the coins and bills that drop into the fiddle case they lay open in front of them.

Finally, there are the folks who live at Rolling Ridge, a community and retreat center in the Blue Ridge Mountains of West Virginia, where I visited often growing up.<sup>7</sup> Community members live in homes that they do not own themselves. Instead, they pay “rent” into the community’s non-profit coffers.

The work they do at and for Rolling Ridge—from gardening to planning retreats to filing taxes—is volunteer, so many of them also piece together paid work outside of the community to pay for the things they need. One couple, for example, juggles their unpaid work (family caretaking, work at Rolling Ridge, and assorted other involvements outside the community) with the website de-

sign and counseling work they do in between, for income.

I could go on and on with stories of people’s unique life-compositions. I need these stories. They broaden my viewfinder as I imagine my own future life.

Life transitions are for me a lively and unpredictable landscape, stretched out between periods that are usually more certain and routinized. They are a good time to pull a favorite poem off my bookshelf. In “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front,” Wendell Berry implores us to “every day do something / that won’t compute.” How to do this? “Love the world,” he writes. “Work for nothing. / Take all you have and be poor.”

This may sound like absurd advice, especially to those hunting for employment in a failing economy. I know that regardless of whether one lives with a salary and a pension or without, whether one owns a house and a dog or lives in a janitor’s closet, life is rarely easy and straightforward. I also know that the more alternative versions of “making a living” become even more challenging when children are involved. Still, I am grateful for Wendell Berry and the people in my life who remind me that there is no one right answer to the what-next question.

From what I hear, road trips through Arizona help too.

—Deborah Good, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, has been a very-full-time student at Temple University for two years and anticipates earning her Master’s degree in social work in Au-

*gust. She can be reached at deborahagood@gmail.com.*

### Notes

1. My coming Master's degree requires that I use a long and obscure word in this column's first sentence. It also requires that I use notes.

2. Answer: At least nine times that I can count easily. I'll list them for you if you ask.

3. Premature for me, that is, as I still had six credits to go before earning my degree.

4. The quote is from Bateson's essay, "Composing a Life Story," which appears in *The Impossible Will Take a Little While: A Citizen's Guide to Hope in a Time of Fear*, ed. Paul Loeb (Basic Books, 2004), p. 209.

5. Middle-class Adulthood = Career(x2) + House + Landscaping + Car(x2) + Financial security + Spouse + Kids

6. The friend's name is Ted Springer (see [www.thelandwithnoname.net](http://www.thelandwithnoname.net)) and the New York artist he works for is Ursula Von Rydingsvard (worth googling).

7. [www.rollingridge.net](http://www.rollingridge.net)

### Stalker

We're still not sure how she got out, but I picked up her paw prints easily enough in the freshly fallen snow. No surprises. She'd

headed next door, went around the back to the trash cans, checked out each washline pole, then proceeded down the street, stopping at every

house to sniff at the usual places. I caught up with her at the Wilson's garage door behind which their black Lab, Casey,

was raising a fuss. Some suppose God is Holy Tracker, pursuing us down the days, following the twisted trail of our

follies with relentless purpose. I'm not so sure. But every now and then I do feel followed. I turn around and look.

—Ken Gibble

## "Silent Light"

### A Film Review

Jim Juhnke

Carlos Reygadas, a Mexican film director, is the latest in a long line of worldly wise artists to exploit traditionalist Mennonite (or Amish) community as a canvas to express a creative spiritual vision. Reygadas' new film, "Silent Light," shared the Jury Prize with another film at the Cannes Film Festival. It opened on January 7, 2009, at the Film Forum theater in Manhattan. It is not clear if and when "Silent Light" will be released for wider distribution. An art film that makes great demands of its viewers, it will not likely reach a mass audience.

I saw the film after paying a six-dollar senior discount admission fee at the Film Forum. "Silent Light" had a greater impact on me that weekend than several other acclaimed shows that I saw on Broadway ("Equus," "In the Heights," "Becky Shaw") where my seats cost more than ten to fifteen times as much. I hope to see it again and recommend it, with reservation, to others.

The "Silent Light" story unfolds in the Old Colony Mennonite community of Chihuahua, Mexico. A Mennonite farmer—married, and father of six children—is committing passionate adultery with a single Mennonite woman. We see the silent strength

and love of the family in extended beautiful scenes of patterned behavior at mealtime, at devotions, and at a swimming/bathing pool.

The farmer and his lover are both anguished by their infidelity that, if they continue, will bring chaos to family and community. The farmer tells the most important people in his life about the problem—his wife, his father (who is also a preacher), and his good friend, a mechanic.

But none is able to help him control his passion. The result is tragedy, followed by a shocking shift into a magical realist mode that implies some kind of redemption.

“*Silent Light*” moves as slowly as an incoming tide. The audience has its attention span tested to the limit. The opening sunrise scene takes six minutes—moving from a dark starry sky to the rich colors of clouds and the rising sun, accompanied by the sounds of awakening insects and farm animals.

Subsequent scenes linger agonizingly long on the actors’ faces and on simple architecture, with human figures subordinated as they move in or out of the frame. Spoken words are sparse. Viewers must listen to the silence and see the subtle changes in the light.

Perhaps the director’s most bold decision was to use non-professional actors. Almost all are Mennonites whose ancestors migrated from Prussia to Russia to Canada, and, in the 1920s, to Mexico. Their names are familiar to those of Mennonite background: Wall, Pankratz, Klassen, Fehr, and Toews. All the conversation

is in Low German (*Plautdietsch*) with English subtitles.

Convincing proof of Regadas’ genius as a film director lies in his ability to get his amateur cast to manifest the demeanor and expressions essential for his extended camera takes. No doubt the director was helped by the fact that the sad and somber mood of “*Silent Light*” corresponds well with the simplicity, gentleness, and impassivity of Old Colony ways.

One of the lead actors did not come from the Chihuahua Old Colony community. Miriam Toews, a prominent ex-Mennonite Canadian writer, plays the role of the farmer’s wife. According to an article in the *Toronto Globe & Mail*, director Reygadas found her photograph on the inside cover of her popular novel, *A Complicated Kindness* (2004). The director saw there “something mournful and broken and perfect for his new film.”<sup>1</sup> Toews does not speak Low German, but that was no problem because her lines were few and perhaps dubbed.

There is an ironical difference between Regadas’ film and Toews’ novel. “*Silent Light*” is respectful of Old Colony Mennonite life to the point of sentimentality. *A Complicated Kindness* is the polar opposite of sentimental. Toews lashes out bitterly against her home community of Steinbach, Manitoba, for the wounds that Mennonite religious bigotry inflicted upon her and her family.

Those of us who have Amish and Mennonites roots, as well as any who care about the fate of traditionalist

communities, will leave this film with questions about the impact of the project on Old Colony Mennonites in Mexico. Were these actors from the center or from the fringes of Old Colony life? What was the attitude of the truly traditionalist leaders toward this project?

Two of the lead actors, Cornelio Wall Fehr (Johan) and Maria Pankratz (Marianne), who played the farmer and his lover, went to the Cannes Film

Festival and were photographed in tuxedo and fancy dress along with Carlos Regadas, “looking a bit sheepish.”<sup>2</sup> This must remind us of the five young Amish adults featured in the ten-week 2004 television reality show, “*Amish in the City*.” These are people in hapless flight from their religious/ethnic homes.

In 1984-85 the prize-winning film, “*Witness*,” on an Old Order landscape in Pennsylvania, prompted a controversy about media exploitation. John A. Hostetler, an ex-Amish sociologist and writer of books about the Amish, warned against the corrosive effects of this media invasion. Paramount Pictures offered one Old Order Amish man two thousand dollars for the temporary use of his farm. To another whose barn had recently burned, they offered full payment for an authentic Amish barn raising. The Amish rejected both offers.

Nevertheless, Hostetler predicted that the movie would “signal a milestone in the erosion of the social fabric of the Amish community.”<sup>3</sup> “*Wit-*

ness” did turn out to be a popular box office success that resulted in a substantial growth of tourism into Pennsylvania Amish country.

I am not aware of any Mennonite scholar/expert on the Old Colony Mennonites in Mexico who is taking up a role akin to that of Hostetler in defending the traditionalist religious community against outside intrusion. There are substantial differences in

these cases. Peter Weir, director of “*The Witness*,” answered Hostetler’s charges by noting that he did not use any Amish actors and did not film any actual Amish persons. Carlos Regadas’ success with “*Silent Light*” had everything to do with his Mennonite actors.

Did the making of the film affect the social fabric of the Old Colony community? Perhaps not much. “*Silent Light*” is no blockbuster, and the isolated Old Colony Mennonites, as far as I know, are unlikely to fall victim to tourist voyeurism.

Both “*Witness*” and “*Silent Light*” sustain respect for the core values and traditional ways of Old Order and Old Colony people. In both cases there were some details about traditionalist life that the directors did not get exactly right. Reygadas has less interest than Weir (and than most literature by Mennonites) in the social mechanisms Mennonites use to maintain boundaries against worldly influences. Both Weir and Reygadas intended to produce works of art.

**Both “Witness” and “Silent Light” sustain respect for the core values and traditional ways of Old Order and Old Colony people.**

They should not be judged primarily by a standard of documentary fidelity to Mennonite or Amish social reality.

**B**ut what are we to make of the hints of redemption at the conclusion of “Silent Light”? Here the film falters. In the end, Reygadas shifts into a fantastic world where the rules of nature, of time, and of the social order no longer apply. A dead person awakens and the sun sets in the east. Unlike Christian images of a future in heaven, Regadas offers a mystical return to the past. Symbolic confession and contrition are apparently supposed to make it magically possible for these plain and simple people to return to a blessed time before adulterous passion, before the Fall.

*Silent Light* may be stunningly beautiful and provocative. It may re-

veal the aching contradiction between human passion and social order. But by the conclusion I, for one, found it pretentious, confusing, and unconvincing as an ultimate spiritual vision.

—James C. Jubnke, *Wichita, Kansas, is Professor Emeritus of History, Bethel College.*

### Notes

1. Simon Houpt, “Miriam Toews: from author to actress,” *Toronto Globe & Mail*, May 12, 2007, cited by Magdalene Redekop, “‘Stellet Licht’ and the ‘Narcissism of Small Differences,’ *Rhubarb*, Winter 2007 #16, 44.

2 Redekop, 45-46.

3. John A. Hostetler, “Marketing the Amish Soul,” *The Gospel Herald* (June 26, 1984), 452.



## “The Soloist”— Flawed Genius, Flawed Film

### A Review

Dave Greiser

**I** admit that I came to “The Soloist” with a level of personal investment. I loved the writing of Steve Lopez back in the 1990s when Lopez was a columnist for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and I was living in the city. In fact, I would occasionally quote his columns in sermons to the urban congregation I then served as pastor. I was crushed when Lopez took the money and ran to Los Angeles (back to his boyhood home, as it turned out) to work for the *L.A. Times*.

During those years I also carried a never-ending fascination for the phenomenon of urban homelessness. How was it that the richest country in the world could allow so many people to sleep on its city streets? How was it that certain people actually preferred to sleep on newspaper unrolled over a heating grate, rather than spending the night in a heated room on a mattress?

For me the questions at one point became even more personal. For a time, my wife and I befriended a schizophrenic man in our apartment building who

occasionally would go off his medicine and spend several nights in a nearby park.

“The Soloist” helped me to re-experience those years of my life without bringing me closer to finding answers to my questions. The film is based (rather loosely, at points) on the true story of Steve Lopez (played by Robert Downey Jr.) and his real-life relationship with Nathaniel Ayers (played by Jamie Foxx). Lopez discovers Ayers in Los Angeles’ Pershing Park, sitting at the feet of a statue of Beethoven and playing Beethoven’s music on a violin with two strings.

Nathaniel’s rambling speech suggests a serious mental illness, but when he mentions as an aside that he once attended the Juilliard School, an otherwise disinterested Lopez decides the man is worth one column. When a reader sends Lopez a cello for Nathaniel, the one-off column becomes a relationship.

A conventional Hollywood plot would suggest that the two men would go on to develop a relationship which at first is strained but eventually reaches a revelatory moment in which each man discovers that the other has something that he needs to become whole. A less conventional plot line—one more worthy of recognition at Oscar time—would tell a harder hitting tale with a sad ending. Since this is a true story and not either of the above, the actual plot falls

somewhere in between. Possibly for that reason, it is hard to track or to describe the emotional tone of this film.

“The Soloist” does several things very well. Through the effective use of actual homeless people and scenes shot in and around a real-life shelter (credit director Joe Wright for these) the film provides an unsparing portrait of a homeless community. We feel Lopez’ disorientation and fear as he seeks out Nathaniel’s overnight habitat, on streets where crack addicts suck on pipes and couples huddle against chain link fences. Hollow eyes seem to follow Lopez everywhere he goes.

The film also excels in its portrayal of the social service workers who serve the homeless community. When Lopez insists that a social worker should help him to force Nathaniel to be committed for treatment, the social worker calmly explains that unless Nathaniel is an imminent threat to himself or someone else, he cannot simply be locked away. Diagnosis of mental illness is an inexact practice; offering a man trust and friendship, the social worker suggests, may do more to help him in the long run than medication. The social workers in “The Soloist” are less saints than weary workers whose organizations are completely understaffed and underfunded.

**T**he movie loses its way when it tries to fill out its characters through sidebar stories. For some reason the direc-

tor decides that Lopez needs an ex-wife who is also his boss (played by Catherine Keener), with whom he can presumably show us the self-centered jerk he was before meeting Nathaniel and learning that people exist to be loved and not simply written about. Middlebrow Hollywood convention seems to require that characters in stories learn “lessons.” Since the real-life Lopez was never divorced, and since the addition of this detail does little to advance the story, one can only guess at the reason for such a dramatic decision.

The other area in which the film struggles is in the always tricky depiction of mental illness. For two-thirds of the story, Nathaniel appears docile and relatively articulate. When he becomes suddenly violent, then just as

quickly apologizes for his outburst, it seems to come out of nowhere. The common emotional arc of schizophrenia suggests that greater realism would have been achieved if Nathaniel’s anger had been a recognizable part of his personality throughout the film.

Despite these weaknesses, “The Soloist” is a worthwhile two hours. It takes us no closer to finding answers to the problem of homelessness—but suggests that until the solutions of experts are found, the caring of willing amateurs may be the most honest, humanizing response we can imagine.

—*Dave Greiser spends his nights on a memory foam mattress next to his wife of thirty years, Anita. He lives and teaches in Hesston, Kansas.*



## Lifting the Fog

*A Review of Mennonite Women in Canada*

Daniel Hertzler

*Mennonite Women in Canada: A History* by Marlene Epp. University of Manitoba Press, 2008.

When I was invited to review this book I thought “Why not?” but two-thirds of the way through it I became depressed. It seemed that all the men were “heavies” who either took women for granted, held them back, or even abused them. Then I thought to relate the book to Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States* which I reviewed in the last issue and which is intended as history from below.

Or as Epp puts it in the introduction, “In some accounts of Mennonite pioneers and immigrants in Canada, women are starkly invisible, although we know women were surely there” (3). It is the function of this history to bring women out so they can be seen as a significant part of Canadian Mennonite history. “A main goal of this study is to explore women’s roles, as prescribed and lived, within contexts of immigration and settlement, household and family life, church and organizational life, work and education, and response to societal trends and events” (4). Each of the five pairs above is covered in a separate chapter.

Epp, who teaches History and Peace and Conflict Studies at Conrad Grebel University College of the University of Waterloo, Ontario, is working within the Anabaptist tradition, but she includes a quotation from M. J. Heisey, who, she says, “has aptly argued that ‘nonconformist Anabaptists have largely borrowed their gender expectations from the larger society’” (8). When we stop to think of it, we realize this society has been patriarchal.

Epp makes another generalization which I find of interest. She differentiates between conservative groups such as the Old Orders “who may have envisioned women within a framework of being different but equal and called for comparable yieldedness on the part of both men and women, while certain ‘modern’ Mennonite groups uphold a rationale for subordination that is rooted in the fundamentalism of the Christian religious right wing and thus are not ‘progressive’ at all in their attitudes to women” (21).

She returns to the subject of the fundamentalism now and then throughout the book and observes that women themselves at times came out on different sides of the issue. For example, she mentions the 1971 book *Woman Liberated* by Lois Gunden Clemens, “radical for its time, which argued that male-female sex differences were the basis for gender equality in church and society.” But she notes that “other Mennonites were also keen readers of *The Total Woman* by Marabel Morgan . . . which sug-

gested that marriages would improve if wives were submissive, obedient, and obliging to their husbands” (278).

**E**ach of the five main chapters views the experiences of Canadian Mennonite women from a different perspective and each is introduced with a colorful three-word title covering one of the five topics mentioned above. The first chapter is “Pioneers, Refugees, and Transnationals,” and she opens with the accounts of three pioneer Mennonite women. The first is Barbara Schulz Oesch

(1803-1881), who moved to Ontario from Bavaria in 1824 and who was to bear 18 children. Her husband John was ordained as a minister in 1829 and later died four days before the first birthday of their eighteenth child.

In 1875 came Katherina Hiebort (1855-1910) from Russia to Manitoba, having married a widower with five children. She was to become a midwife and healer whose “daughter recalled that ‘She was always away, day and night, summer and winter, tending the sick’” (24).

The third example is Susie Redekopp (1979-), whose great-grandparents had come to Canada from Russia but whose grandparents moved to Mexico in the 1920s. She returned to Canada with her husband Henry in the 1990s. Henry was killed in a farm accident, so she went back to Mexico.

As Epp observes, these “are all Canadian Mennonite women,

**When we stop to think of it, we realize this society has been patriarchal.**

though there is much about their life stories that is very different. Yet they share stories of diaspora, of uprooting, migration, and settlement, that are central to the histories of many Mennonites who made Canada their home” (25).

As stressful as their lives would have been, they would not have compared with those of the refugees who came to Canada as widows after their husbands had disappeared during the Stalin purges: “Women whose husbands were dead or missing found themselves performing traditional masculine roles—breadwinner, protector, moral strategist—during their refugee sojourn in Europe and then as new immigrants to Canada” (55).

Chapter 2, “Wives, Mothers, and ‘Others’” is a wide-ranging survey of sexual mores, wedding practices, and the dangers of birthing and raising children in the days before modern medical support systems. “Before the Second World War maternal mortality rates in Canada were high—indeed higher than in most other Western countries except the United States—and childbirth related death was second only to tuberculosis in cause of female deaths” (75).

Death of children was also to be expected. “Indeed, it was rare if a nineteenth-century or early twentieth-century family did not lose at least one of their children to illness or accident” (87).

Included in this chapter is a story of one particularly unimaginative husband who “just after a baby was born . . . brought the cow to the door, demanding that his wife milk it, as it

was her duty. Katherina apparently gave him a good scolding and instructed the woman to stay in bed” (79).

Among the male efforts to maintain the patriarchal order was a “Birth Control Committee, appointed by the Mennonite Conference of Ontario in 1944 . . . a prime example of an all-male decision-making body” seeking to control women’s sexual activity (92).

Also this chapter cites the efforts of several male theological leaders to interpret the roles of the wives. B. Charles Hostetter wrote in the *Canadian Mennonite* in 1954 that “The God-given duties of a wife were to regard her husband as the head of the home, to convert the house into a home, to assume the responsibilities of motherhood, and to provide a normal sex life for her husband.” Earlier, in 1919, Clayton F. Derstine had “observed that the home should be like a ‘kingdom’ in which the father ruled” (113).

Chapter 3, “Preachers, Prophets and Missionaries,” highlights the efforts of women to exercise their gifts for church leadership and finding themselves restricted. Epp comments that “religion can be either oppressive or empowering in women’s lives, and this is more likely, can be both simultaneously and also somewhere in between” (121). Although Ann J. Allebach was ordained as a Mennonite minister in Philadelphia in 1911, the first Canadian Mennonite woman to be ordained was Doris Weber in 1979.

Among the pronouncements on the subject of leadership included in the book is this one from the 1963 Mennonite Church *Confession of Faith* in an article on “symbols of Christian order.” The statement acknowledges that “in Christ there is neither male nor female” but “it qualified spiritual equality by stating that ‘in order of creation God has fitted man and woman for differing functions; man has been given a primary leadership role, though the woman is especially fitted for nurture and service’” (123). One assumes the article was written by men.

Numbers of Canadian Mennonite congregations did not include women in formal church decisions. “Until the latter half of the twentieth century, most churches denied women direct participation in major decision-making bodies of the church administrative structures” (135). The Home Street Mennonite Church in Winnipeg at one point had “at the same time a female treasurer while not allowing women to vote on church business” (137).

Women as missionaries generally found more opportunity to use their gifts for leadership, but problems could develop when they came home to report. “If the husband-and-wife missionary couple was speaking in a church, it was self-evident who would bring the message, the wife perhaps speaking to the children’s Sunday school or the women’s organization.”

However in 1917, when P. W. Penner, a missionary from India,

went to the hospital with appendicitis, his wife took his place at three sessions of a mission conference and raised \$1184. “As churches gradually became more flexible toward the idea of ‘women preachers,’ it was often female missionaries who were granted the privilege of speaking directly from the pulpit” (147).

In summarizing this chapter, Epp indicates that for 200 years in Canada “Mennonite women expressed their religiosity in multiple and varied ways. . . .

“Women could be leaders in churches, but only when men were temporarily not available. . . . It was the feminist movement of the 1970s and following that ultimately pushed open the door to women in official church ministry positions” (177-178).

Chapter 4, “Nonconformists, Nonresistors and Citizens,” takes the story in a slightly different direction but continues the concern to show women bumping up against male assumptions. Epp mentions two Mennonite perspectives: nonconformity to the world and nonresistance in response to warfare. “This chapter will explore the gendered way in which Mennonite women lived out and experienced the impact of these beliefs” (181).

For the former, Epp was to discover that women were to carry a heavier burden than men. “The double standard of nonconformity was particularly gender-specific when it

**“Women could be leaders in churches, but only when men were . . . not available. . . .”**

came to dress” (183). She perceives that the influence of fundamentalism affected the tensions which developed over women’s behavior. “Fundamentalists shared a ‘general horror’ over the ‘new women’ who had appeared in the twentieth century and were increasingly skeptical about the hitherto accepted beliefs in women’s moral superiority” (185).

In Swiss Mennonite churches women were expected to cover their heads in worship and to wear bonnets instead of hats. Bonnets became an issue in the First Mennonite Church of Kitchener, Ontario, and seem to have been a major factor leading to the formation of Stirling Avenue, for a time an independent Mennonite congregation. It “quickly developed a reputation as a liberal church in which women were allowed to be on the church council and participate equally with men in church decision-making” (189).

As for nonresistance, during World War II, of course, men were drafted and women were not. Nevertheless, “CO women found themselves supporting the ‘peace effort’ in much the same way that other Canadian women were supporting the ‘war effort’” (200). In addition, responsibilities and opportunities developed on the home farms and in the work force because of the absence of men. Some Mennonite women also supported the soldiers and a few even joined the military as, of course, did some Mennonite men.

In chapter 5 “Quilters, Canners, and Writers,” Epp begins again, this time

with reference to how Mennonite women expressed their creativity. “Their desire for self-expression was channeled into forms of creativity and output that were allowed for Mennonite women within the church and societal context that often circumscribed female behaviors and activity in rigid ways” (226). This creativity was particularly demonstrated in homemaking, especially “handwork and cooking.” However, “Mennonite women also expressed themselves as artists, writers, and musicians” (229).

Household appliances began to lighten the housework burdens during the period surveyed. The purchase of such household tools often took second place to new machinery for the farm to improve farm productivity. But “Maria Martens Klassen was surprised when her husband used their 1950 berry cheque to purchase a vacuum cleaner, justifying the seeming extravagance by saying it was the only way he could get rid of the salesman” (247).

The issue of women working for pay outside the home called for the usual discussion with both men and women lining up on opposite sides. Paul Erb, whose wife Alta Mae was a professional woman, wrote in *Gospel Herald* “that ‘confining the woman into the four walls of the home, even to the additional opportunities of Sunday school and the Missionary and Service Auxiliary, does not provide every outlet needed for our women’” (258).

In contrast, Oscar Burkholder “argued that when Christian men and women departed from their God-as-

signed roles, as found in Scripture, only trouble could come to the realm of human relations.” (258-259). This issue, of course, does not go away. Dr Laura Schlessinger recently published *In Praise of Stay At Home Moms*.

The end of the chapter describes the efforts of women to obtain education and to become readers and writers. No one could stop them from writing, but as Katie Funk Wiebe was to find, “writing can seldom be a first for women if they are wives and mothers. Mothers don’t have a secretary. They don’t have wives. They can be interrupted by most anyone” (271). Yet some did write, as Wiebe herself was to demonstrate.

In the concluding chapter, Epp suggests that 1979 “was in some respects a pivotal point for Canadian Mennonite women generally.” Among the significant happenings was the ordination of Doris Weber as a minister and the arrival of Hmong and Laotian women and their affiliation with Mennonites. Also in the same year Heidi Quiring was crowned as Miss Canada.

“Yet coming at the end of a decade in which second-wave feminists had denounced the beauty pageant phenomenon, the scenario created somewhat of a puzzle for Mennonites who were trying to sort out what roles—traditional or ‘progressive’—Mennonite women should play” (276). It

does seem ironic that ordination to the ministry and a Mennonite Miss Canada came about in the same year.

In the end, Epp reiterates the goal of her study. “My own feminist curiosity led me to peer into the low-lying fog that has hid the complexity of women’s lives in the Canadian Mennonite past” (282). She has lifted the fog. Where we go from here, of course, is the continuing issue. As her quote from M. J. Heisey has illustrated, we seem able to function only within the intellectual climate where we live.

Epp the researcher proposes more research, indicating her hope “that this book will encourage

others to engage in research and writing that will continue to burn away the fog that still may linger.” Those of us concerned about the practice of the radical Anabaptist tradition will hope that it will be possible to go even farther. Is it possible to take seriously the lessons from a history such as hers and support each other in a manner to challenge the endemic sexism in our culture? The record suggests that this must be a delicate operation, one to be undertaken with the appropriate fear and trembling.

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

**Is it possible to take seriously the lessons from a history such as hers and support each other . . . challenge the endemic sexism in our culture?**



## Second Generation

Noël R. King

I was babysitting this kid one day and discovered that her mom was Alice in Wonderland, all grown up now, her own winsome child in my loving, tender care for the day.

“Well, she’s a little, you know,” Alison told me, making the “she’s crazy” sign with her finger circling her ear.

She leaned closer, close enough that I could smell her grape bubblegum breath. “Honestly? If she weren’t so famous and all, I’d be living in a foster home by now.”

“Really?” I said.

“Probably,” she said, swinging her nine-year-old legs as she sat on the coffee table right in front of me.

“She’s not much of a mom, you know,” she added. “She talks to the eggs, she talks to the cat, she sings all these songs that don’t make any sense. She forgets that I am not herself sometimes, even when it’s clear that I am not.”

“Hmmm. . . .” I said. I tried to get myself to attend fully to this perfectly reasonable little girl sitting there in front of me, but my longing to know something that I had pondered all these years finally won out:

“Well, do you think all those things really did happen to her just like the books said—before she tried to

pretend it was all just a dream at the end?” I waited breathlessly, a little faint, some humming in my ears. How my world might change in just one sentence from this new-found channel to the Truth!

“I don’t know,” she said. “Look, can I have a cheese sandwich this time for lunch? I think I’m gonna throw up if I have to eat her Jabberwocky Crocky one more time.”

“Um, okay,” I said. I watched her legs go back and forth. It was slightly hypnotic; I was starting to feel a little dazed. My moment of impending Truth had been so very short, and I needed a moment here to readjust to life in its far more typically foggy form.

Seeing a pillow embroidered with a red chess king lying behind her on the couch, I finally said, “Hey, you wanna play some chess, just like your mama did? That would be a really fun thing to do, don’t you think?”

“I hate chess,” she said. “I only play cards.”

**“Hey, you wanna play some chess, just like your mama did?”**

“Off with their heads!” I cried, and laughed uproariously. (I might have been a little overwrought from my dashed desire to know the Truth.)

She looked at me like I had just sprouted a puppy out of my head.

“It was in the book,” I said. “The queen, you know.”

“Whatever,” she said. “I haven’t read it.”

Later that night by her bed, I didn’t say anything when I turned down her blankets and saw: two dog-eared copies of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*, Alison’s name in bright pink on the front, lying wide open beneath all her pillows.

*—As circumstances warrant, through her Turquoise Pen column Noël R. King, Scottsville, Virginia, reports on strange and wonderful or worrisome things, including what happened when Alice had Alison.*





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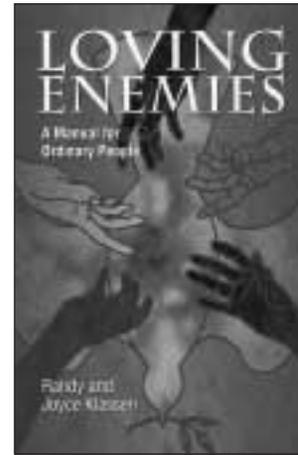
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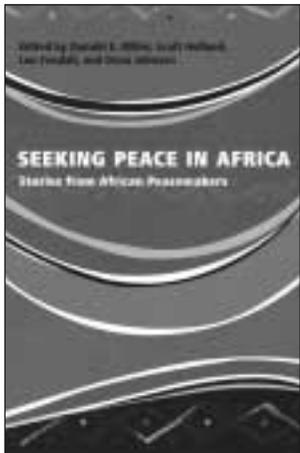
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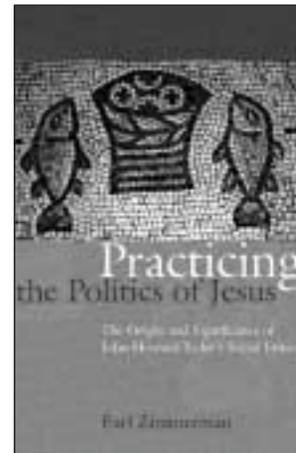
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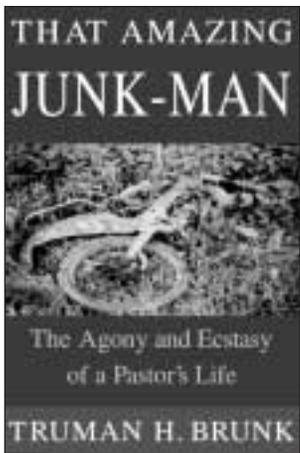
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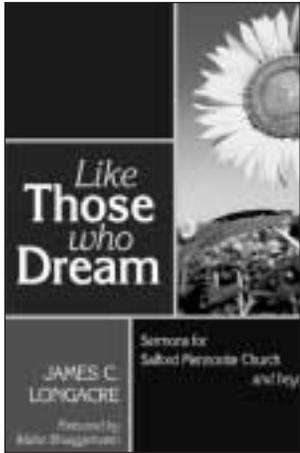
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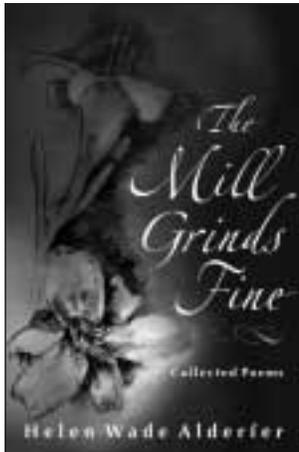
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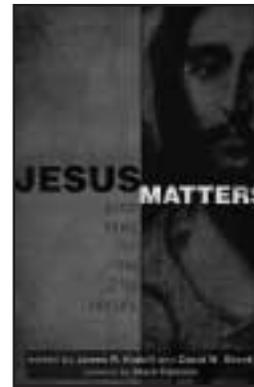
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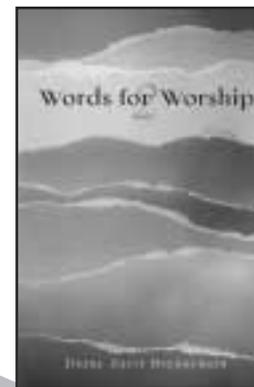
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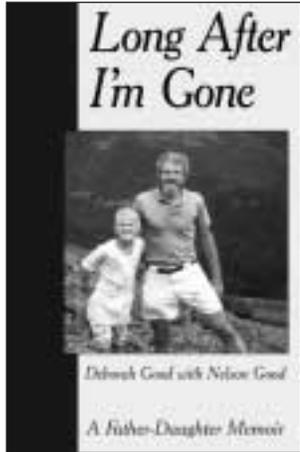
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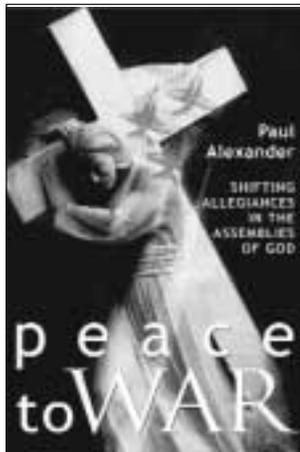


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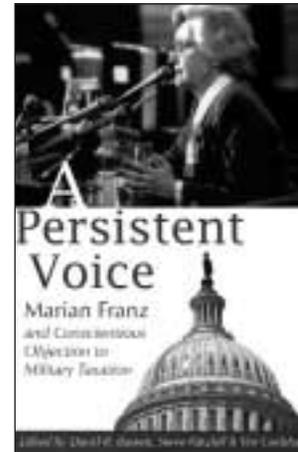
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*Jake*

He told me once he tore a ligament  
playing high school football. His  
limp is only slight most times,  
but today the weather's cold, damp.  
He looks and sounds old. I see

he's come to talk, a gentle  
giant, six foot five, father of five  
boys who've driven more  
than one Sunday school teacher  
into reluctant retirement. He

loves them, loves their mother  
who's sick now, very sick. How's  
Rose? I say to get the conversation  
underway. I know that's why he's  
here. She's bad, he says, then

sits and twists his hands. I  
try again: how are the boys handling  
this? He shrugs. We sit in silence.  
Minutes pass. He lifts his head.  
He's furious, his voice a roar.

If she's gonna die anyway . . .  
He stops, begins again . . . I wish  
to God she'd just get on  
with it. He staggers to his feet,  
lurches to the door and through it,

gimps his way to the parking lot.  
I murmur a blessing.  
Go, Godwrestler, I say  
as he drives away.

—*Ken Gibble*