DreamSeeker Magazine

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Editorial: From Mennonite to Anabaptist and Beyond

As the deadline for putting this issue of *DreamSeeker Magazine* together arrived, I was writing my column on how Anabaptist-Mennonite values might be meaningful beyond ethnic enclaves. It occurred to me the articles and artwork in hand for publication could be organized to convey the movement from ethnic Mennonite customs to generic Anabaptist values my column proposes.

These materials convey rich insight and imagery in their own right. Yet I want in this editorial to focus on that potential Mennonite-to-Anabaptist-and-beyond flow of meaning, because it seems to me a worthwhile one to ponder with readers of *DSM*, many of you Mennonites—but also many of you belonging to other communities.

How do members of any subculture embrace their heritage yet offer its gifts to those shaped by other communities?

How do members of any subculture embrace their heritage yet offer its gifts to those shaped by other communities? That is my question.

I don't claim this issue of *DSM* answers it, but I hope it engages it. I've tried to work at this by visualizing the materials as moving roughly from those whose meaning is likely to be enriched by membership in an ethnic Mennonite subculture to those whose meaning is likely less tied to a subcultural perspective.

Thus the Sairs article, Swartztentruber paintings, Hertzler review, and my own column all strike me as carrying on a conversation particularly meaningful to those shaped by specific ethnic Mennonite communities. I know these stories and images and feelings in my bones; I was raised in them. They are flesh of my flesh.

But readers not sharing that heritage may at times shake heads. Without Swartzentruber's annotations, what might you make, for instance, of that naked boy being ogled in church? Yet that boy could be me. My grandparents were excommunicated; in *The Merging*, my Aunt Evie tells of the day the bishop came down the lane to give the bad news.

Then (along with poets interspersed throughout) come Stoltzfus, Kriss, Landis, Gehman, Good, Fernando, King. They are almost all from Mennonite backgrounds, and this no doubt nuances their writing in ways my own Mennonite-immersed brain can't even fully grasp. But their passions strike me as moving out in widening circles, article by article, away from the particularity of explicit Mennonite concerns and toward insights that by the final articles could be at home in a range of journals having little connection with Mennonites or Anabaptism.

Is this good? Bad? My column affirms moving toward broader accessibility. Yet if I dare risk cliché, after watching this movement play out in these pages, I end up thinking we need it all—the particularity of a heritage *and* the ability to share it widely.

—Michael A. King

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In This Issue

Winter 2007, Volume 7, Number 1

Response: *She Stands, Still Weeping*

her caravan moves swiftly
across the plain, away from the city,
away from home. all her past, possessions,
confidants, confessions that define her

are aflame. how could she not stop,
not glance—eyes overflowing,
salt on her tongue, tears
down her cheeks, shoulders.
the morning passes, and then
the day, tears still streaming
down her skin, dripping

into her pores. months, years,
a decade of shock, of realizing
why and weeping, flesh absorbing
a mother's salt of sorrows—
corrosion from the epiphany
that unveils corruption
turns all mothers into monuments

of tears, reminding God of sorrow.
at least someone is mourning as only
a mother can—of course her husband
does not stop, does not wonder how
that pillar got there. only she can

say why her home was destroyed
in sulfur; only Lot's wife knows
God's secret; it whispers in her heart,
as she shouts back *Far be that from you!*
that is why she turned, why
she stands, still weeping, and
why the pillar grows steadily.

—*Travis Poling, Richmond, Indiana, is a member of the Church of the Brethren and student at Bethany Theological Seminary and Earlham School of Religion with a focus in Ministry of Writing. A Pennsylvanian in exile, he likes to look back at his true home in the Cumberland Valley. As of yet, he is not a pillar of salt. This poem was submitted in response to "Lot's Wife," by Suzanne Ehst (*DreamSeeker Magazine*, Summer 2007).*

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

Pop Goes the Mennonite

Conversations with an Artist and His Work

Vicki Sairs

Bugs Bunny Meets Our Anabaptist Forefather

I stared at my computer monitor and thought, *Whoa! Look at that. I wonder what this guy's thinking?* On the screen was a drawing of Menno Simons. A tiny open book stuck out of his mouth in place of a tongue, and a world-famous cartoon rabbit stood on our poor brother's outstretched beard. Bugs Bunny rested a casual paw against Menno's forehead and chomped on a carrot, insouciant as ever. The picture was titled, "What's Up, Menno?" and that's pretty much what I was asking myself: *What's up with this?*

Clicking from one image to the next in the online art gallery, I found myself drawn into the surreal world of the artist behind the pictures—Don Swartzentruber. It is not a world for the faint of heart, but I've learned some things by visiting it.

I've learned, for instance, not to form hasty conclusions when viewing this artist's work. His images have been called bizarre, grotesque, and disturbing, and they often are. But they are that way for a reason.

"The work I create is not to shock and not to offend," says Swartzentruber. Rather, he is trying to create a "narrative that will have an impact." He wants to give people something "to wrestle with."

A believer in the Socratic method, he wants viewers of his work to question their "dogmas, traditions, personal history, and worldview." Swartzentruber cites Rosedale Bible College (RBC) faculty emeritus Elmer Jantzi as an example of someone who could get his students to think critically. "Elmer Jantzi was great at the Socratic method. He would just stand up there with a big grin on his face and ask questions. . . . "

Viewers might even find themselves longing for a little more clarity and reassurance that their world is not really as dangerous a place as it appears to be in the *Pop-Mennonite* exhibit.

Carrying that method of teaching into the world of art is risky. In the hands of a lesser artist, the work could become preachy. It is far from that, and viewers might even find themselves longing for a little more clarity and reassurance that their world is not really as dangerous a place as it appears to be in the *Pop-Mennonite* exhibit.

Swartzentruber runs another risk. His art grapples with faith issues yet does not spell out easy answers. This leaves him open to misinterpretation. "At first glance," he says, "some may find the commentary coarse, but as the images are processed, you will see my bias toward the culture and traditions I grew up in." He has wisely included commentary with his pictures, pointing the viewer in the right direction to decode his intentions.

A Little Background

Before venturing further into Swartzentruber's unsettling artistic universe, let's do a little homework. Who is this guy who wants to shake us up and make us think?

Don lives with his wife and two young sons in Winona Lake, Indiana. His credentials include an M.F.A. in Visual Art from Vermont College of Norwich University, a period of focused study under Disney animator Milt Neil, and numerous grants and awards for instruction and studio practice. Swartzentruber exhibits nationally, teaches art at Grace College, and is a tenured visual art instructor with Warsaw Schools.

Although he grew up in a Conservative Mennonite Conference congregation and spent a term at RBC in 1990, Don and his family now attend a nondenominational church. "My not attending a Mennonite church should not be viewed as a negative statement . . . toward this denomination. I still hold to many Mennonite interpretations of Scripture. As an artist I work from source material that I know and have experienced."

Some of that source material will be familiar terrain for anyone who's been a part of the Mennonite world. *Pop-Mennonite* features pieces that touch on nonresistance, excommunication, plain dress, and foot washing,

but it addresses these and other issues in a broader context. Swartzentruber is asking us to think about what we can "learn about faith and community from a critique of conservative Mennonite culture."

It is difficult even to attempt to live a holy life—we dwell in human flesh and live in a world that wars against such an effort. Yet the history of the Mennonite church is one of people who have tried to take discipleship seriously. The artist says, "This was a group who attempted very deliberately to make all daily activities and rituals holy. Was the overall objective honorable and worthy of consideration?"

Clearly, he thinks it was—why else devote an entire exhibit to the question? His artistic eye does not let any of the obvious pitfalls of Anabaptist excess go undetected. For example, in "Mennonite Jesus—A Publisher's Perspective," he responds to a request by a publisher, years ago, to depict Jesus with short hair and no mustache. The oil painting shows Jesus resting on hay bales, dressed like a farmhand, with a straw in his mouth and no mustache on his face.

The hay bales are in a Stonehenge pattern, and they are shouting—the artist's way of saying "the stones will cry out" at the narrowness of such a request. In his commentary on the picture, Swartzentruber says, "The black flamed candles [in the picture's foreground] suggest that God's mystical presence prevails, even when the Son of God is caricatured."

Yet he doesn't want to let us off the hook, seeing only the deficiencies in an approach to spirituality that sometimes made the way more pinched than narrow. We need to look at the whole picture and think clearly about our collective past and future. "*Pop-Mennonite* sets aside time to discuss how we have assimilated into popular culture," says Swartzentruber. "How has it been a positive experience, and where have we given up traditions for something far less valuable?"

The artist doesn't let the larger culture off the hook, either. He's on a mission to critique what he calls our culture's absorption in triviality, and he uses images from his conservative upbringing to challenge today's "comfortably compartmentalized" spirituality.

But of course, he's an artist, and his work doesn't yield clear meaning at first glance. It would be easy to give this exhibit a cursory look and conclude that he was just making fun of Mennonites. And some viewers might be offended by the harshness of the imagery and the occasional use of nudity.

Wrestling with Socrates

Going back to Bugs and Menno, let's try to answer the artist's question by rephrasing it: What's up, Mennonites? We live in a culture dominated by the media and entertainment icons; Bugs Bunny serves as a kind of court jester, helping us laugh at folly and giving us some relief from the daily tedium of plowing through life. Comedy is good, but what happens when the balance is lost—when life becomes a chasing after laughter and escapist entertainment?

In his commentary, Swartzentruber says that entertainment "has become the new Western religion. We even want our news to be audacious and attractive. In postmodern culture the threat to spiritual ignorance is not atheism, but rather the addiction to active and voyeuristic play."

Mennonites, represented by Menno and his book of a tongue, actually have something of value to say to this culture about its restless search for fulfillment. Have we thought lately about what that might be? And do we know how to say it in a way that can be heard amid all the sound bites and empty noise? What's up, Mennonites?

The alarming piece "Pop Tart" elaborates the same theme, with some terrible twists. A horrified family watches as their young son is seduced by a soulless entertainment machine that feeds the child literal waste, excreted by a demonic Mickey Mouse. Being the big fan of Disneyland that I am, I found this picture hard to take.

I asked Don if he really thought Mickey Mouse was that evil. He laughed and explained that his point was simply, "How much more should we look for something better?"

By e-mail, he said, "The painting 'Pop Tart' describes a boy choosing between the spiritual nourishment of his Mennonite family or the frivolity that entertainment offers. I spent most of my childhood without access to television, film, and many other forms of popular culture. But I longed for its promise of delight, only to find it unsubstantial. As adults, my wife and I have spent the past nine years without watching broadcast TV in our home. The church found it divisive. It is ironic that something I held in such high regard as a child as an adult I opt away from."

The painting that brought me to my emotional knees . . . is "Excommunication. . . ."

He doesn't want to go back to the days when entertainment was forbidden. He just wants us to think about what we're doing with our freedom.

Quilting the Sky

One of Swartzentruber's gentler images is "The Mission Field." Its warm greens and blues evoke a peaceful agrarian scene: a Mennonite family walks along a narrow path that winds through fields so soft and verdant you want to run your fingers through them. The family crosses a covered bridge—made out of a bonnet!—and never turns around to look at the cheerful barn and protective windmill standing watch on the hills in the background.

Swartzentruber's commentary is fascinating, dwelling on the positive aspects of Mennonite culture: "The advantage that Mennonite evangelism has in North America is that it does not regard forfeiting mainstream American culture as a substantial loss." Yet I love this picture because of the sky—it's quilted! I've never seen a better metaphor for the profound desire for order among my Anabaptist brothers and sisters.

But the painting that brought me to my emotional knees, the one that will not let me go, is "Excommunication: The Trickle Down Effect." It depicts a young boy is trapped upside-down and headfirst in his Sunday morning pew, his naked body exposed to the members of the congregation, who look on in attitudes of sympathy, suspicion, and even disgust. The little boy's upper body protrudes through the back of the pew, and he clutches his head and weeps as the pew transforms into a cruel monster that won't leave him alone.

Swartzentruber was a little boy when his father was excommunicated, and this picture is a testimony to the pain and turmoil of that time in his life. "That one by far is the most autobiographical," he says. Yet his father still attends the same church. "That's where my father found God, and that's where my family went. . . . It taught me a lot, because he's not bitter and resentful."

I've rarely seen humiliation and vulnerability so effectively portrayed. It's a haunting painting.

Other notable works in the exhibit are "The Conscientious Objector," "Just As I Am," and "The Last Veiled Feminist" (look for the angel wings in that one).

What's Up, Don?

Although the *Pop-Mennonite* exhibit is no longer on display in Goshen, the artist says it was very well received, and he plans to submit it to other venues. His stated goal was to create "a window, a doorway to dialogue about these issues."

Judging from the responses posted in his guest book, he succeeded. Here's a small sample: "Wonderful, provocative, and principled. I'll be back." "Very interesting and thought provoking!" "Scary, but true." "Deep thoughts, well conveyed." "Touched the nerve. Well done!" And "Back for a second look."

Of course, not everyone was pleased, as exhibited in comments like: "This is stupid and sick." For others, the jury was still out: "Still thinking." After talking with Don and viewing his artwork, I'm sure that at least he is pleased with the latter response.

—*Ohioan Vicki Sairs is a Mennonite by choice and sometimes wishes she didn't have to be. She's seeking publication for her first novel,* I'll Come Following You, *and seven chapters into her second,* Do Not Weep. *She can be reased at vsairs@iapdata-com.net. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes in her article are from e-mail and phone conversations with Don Swartzentruber. Many of the paintings Sairs mentions are reproduced in black-and-white in this issue of* DreamSeeker Magazine. *All can be found, in color, at www.swartzentruber.com.*

Pop-Mennonite

Don Swartzentruber

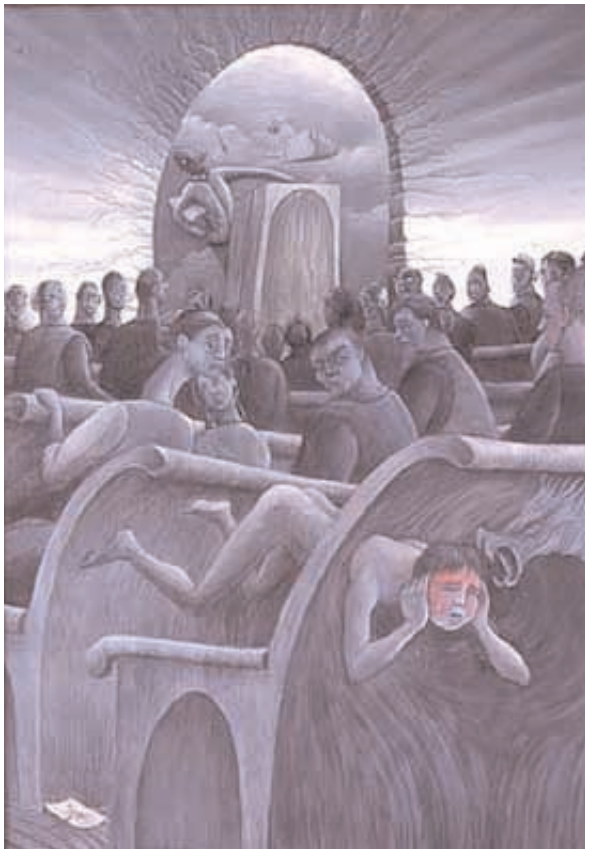
Reproduced here in black-and-white (in the hard copy version) are selected paintings of Don Swartzentruber along with excerpts from his annotations. All the paintings, in color and with full annotations, can be found at www.swartzentruber.com.

Pop Tart. *Andy Warhol noted, "When I got my first television set, I stopped caring so much about having close relationships." Entertainment has become a staple food in the cognitive diet of today's popular culture. . . . The young boy is vulnerable as he happily eats and adds his own waste to Mickey's toilet. He is feasting on foolishness, as entertainment nourishes his developing worldview.*

The Last Veiled Feminist
. . . The chair provides the security of tradition. The phallic desires of men cut at her clothing, tempting her to abandon the dress that camouflages her femininity. Her liberated friends discard their conservative garb, striding toward modernity and worldliness. The praying man symbolizes the much-debated role of headship. . . . My Mennonite ancestors embraced this esoteric symbol with great conviction. . . .

Just As I Am. *The painting ushers a repentant boy down the aisle of youthful transgressions.*

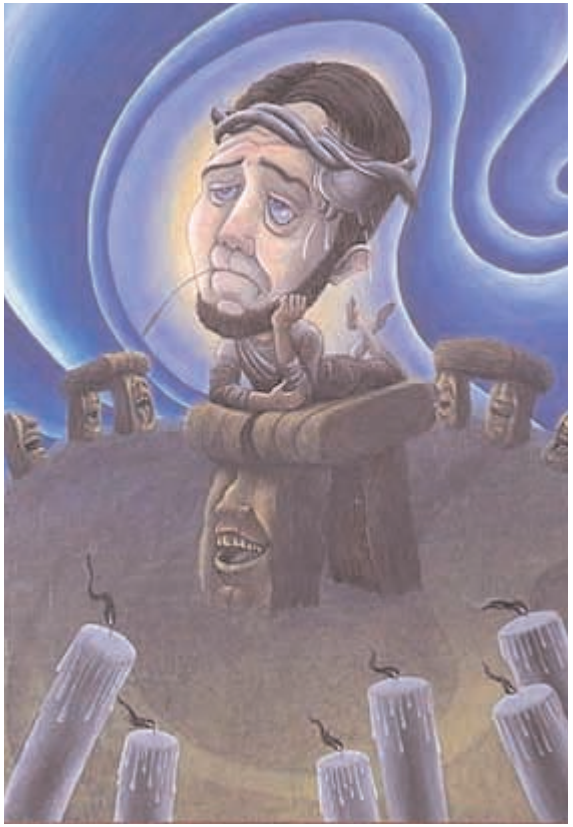
Excommunication
. . . At a time when my identity was forming, I witnessed the excommunication of my father. In this intimate black and white painting, I wanted the congregation to sustain a voyeuristic ambiance. The church is a carnival, with father and me as the spectacle—a sideshow for an otherwise dry and uneventful assemblage. . . .



The Conscientious Objector. . . . *The protagonist, torn between masculine instincts and pacifistic ideals that elude ephemeral justice, brandishes a pitchfork (Matt. 5:44; 6:14). Will he relinquish his violent instincts. . . ? The ethical debate becomes even more complicated when the physical threat is immediate and personal. The sexual deviant behind the bush displays no redeeming behavior and has already violated the woman. Was good will meant to extend to such depravity? . . .*

The Mission Field. . . . *The advantage that Mennonite evangelism has in North America is that it does not regard forfeiting mainstream American culture as a substantial loss. . . .*

Mennonite Jesus. *Contracted . . . by a Mennonite publishing company to illustrate Sunday school material, I was unsettled by a request in regard to the depiction of Jesus. Requiring illustrations of him with short hair and no mustache was not for historical accuracy, but rather because the editorial staff regarded the mustache as a military symbol. . . . This Mennonite publisher is certainly not alone in altering the historical Christ. . . . for the sake of clarifying some philosophical arguments. . . . The setting of this painting is a Stonehenge of hay bales. The composition gives voice to the verse "the stones will cry out." The black flamed candles suggest that God's mystical presence prevails, even when the Son of God is caricatured.*



—Don Michael Swartzentruber, Winona Lake, Indiana, designs carnivalesque images that manifest from interests in theology, cultural issues, and the surreal. He has taught and lectured on the arts for the past ten years. He received an M.F.A. in Visual Art from Vermont College of Norwich University and exhibits nationally. The recipient of numerous grants and awards for his instruction and studio practice, he creates his enigmatic iconography in the historical Billy Sunday community of Winona Lake, where he lives with his wife and two sons.

Farming in the City

Daniel Hertzler

Taking Root in Strange Soil: Hyattsville Mennonite Church 1952-2002, by Gene C. Miller. Hyattsville Mennonite Church, 2005.

This is a congregational history and as such is a view from the inside. If the author at times presents the Hyattsville people as besieged by a variety of outside froces, that is no doubt how it felt. As one who grew up in rural northern Pennsylvania, he has chosen an agricultural metaphor, one which implies difficulties. Let the reader take note.

His thesis is stated at the beginning: The urban context has not been a friendly place to practice the Mennonite faith. Drawing from Paul Peachey's *The Church in the City* (Faith and Life Press, 1963) Miller finds four issues pressing American Mennonites to stay in the country: (1) persecution of Anabaptists in Europe; (2) farming experience on the American frontier; (3) ethnic barriers; (4) a theology which divided sharply between the church and the world (p. 3).

Yet some Mennonites did move to the city, and Miller traces the origin of the Hyattsville Mennonite Church to Henry Brunk, a Mennonite farmer in Virginia whose potatoes rotted in the field during an unusually wet summer. He would look for something else to do and his solution was to move to the city.

As I reflect on the book, I perceive that the author does not apply his metaphor directly, but it broods over his account and provides a perspective which the reader can return to now and then. Another metaphor he might have used would be a journey, even *Pilgrim's Progress* with repeated sidetrips to the Slough of Despond. But I think his metaphor serves him well enough.

In December 1951, nine persons met separately to consider where to go from there. This was the beginning of what would become Hyattsville Mennonite Church.

There was no Mennonite church in the Washington area when Henry Brunk moved to town, so he and some friends cast about to see which Mennonite district conference would provide financial support for the organization of a Mennonite "mission." As it happened, their own Virginia Conference had its finances tied up with other projects, but Lancaster Mennonite Conference came forth and the Cottage City Mennonite Church began its ministry in 1929. Henry Brunk had donated the land on which the meeting house was built.

As members of Lancaster Mennonite Conference, Cottage City Mennonites were expected to follow traditional Mennonite practices, including such countercultural symbols as devotional veilings for women and plain coats for men. The pastor was particularly loyal to these practices.

But a dozen years after Cottage City's beginning came World War II, which brought influences Cottage City had difficulty absorbing. For one thing, young men from the congregation went away as draftees in Civilian Public Service and returned with modified perspectives. For another, after the war Mennonites from other traditions came to Washington to represent the church in relation to issues involving the government. Cottage City was not able to absorb these persons unless they would adopt its traditional practices.

A crisis developed when Henry Brunk's son Nelson, who had been Sunday school superintendent, declined to continue wearing a plain coat. He could no longer serve as superintendent, and he and his wife and several other persons found themselves marginalized in the congregation. In December 1951, nine persons met separately to consider where to go from there. This was the beginning of what would become Hyattsville Mennonite Church.

This would not be a "mission." That is, they would not ask for financial support. But they would seek to affiliate with a Mennonite district conference, one more "flexible" than what they had found at Cottage City. As one reviews the record in the Miller book, one finds this congregation

wrestling with a variety of issues: (1) how to deal with Mennonite boundaries which highlighted the division between the church in the world; (2) how to maintain a vital congregational fellowship involving professional people with demanding schedules and residences scattered throughout the greater Washington area; (3) how to achieve a balance between lay and professional leadership; (4) how to find a place for meeting.

The first issue they seem to have handled by gradually sloughing off practices which did not seem to fit their context: distinctive clothing, closed communion, even the ritualized washing of one another's feet, a practice which Mennonites have shared with the Church of the Brethren and the Churches of God. (Numbers of other Mennonite congregations have followed a similar pattern but perhaps on a more extended schedule).

The fourth issue was resolved in 1959, with the purchase of a lot and the erection of a meeting house at a cost of $62,016.21. The second and third issues have been subjects for ongoing congregational agenda.

In the meantime the young congregation would look for a district conference home and found it with the Southwestern Pennsylvania Mennonite Conference (later to be named Allegheny Mennonite Conference). Miller observes that "The Southwestern Pennsylvania group offered a conference affiliation that was more collegial than authoritarian. There was no board of bishops that would dictate to Georgetown [later Hyattsville] regarding ecclesial matters; instead there was a carefully balanced practice of consultation and conference where participants engaged each other with an eye toward discovering mutually acceptable solutions" (18-19).

Questions regarding lay and professional leadership were to occupy the congregation for at least 40 of its first 50 years.

Questions regarding lay and professional leadership were to occupy the congregation for at least 40 of its first 50 years. C. Nevin Miller, a faculty member at Eastern Mennonite College, served as commuting pastor from 1952 to 1956. Then John R. Martin came for three years, and finally in 1960 Kenneth Good came from Illinois to Hyattsville, where the church had just completed their new meeting house.

Good was an experienced pastor, having served Mennonite congregations in Virginia, Ohio, and Illinois. Miller reports that "Ken's experience as administrator and motivator, combined with the fact that he was Hyattsville's first real full-time minister, meant that he was able to take charge quickly" (38).

He stayed eleven years, but then resigned on August 1 1971, because he perceived "that his and Hyattsville's paths were diverging." Miller observes that "Hyattsville under Ken Good was initially coalescing around the more traditional and quasi-corporate ecclesial style in which the pastor is the chief operating officer, but at the same time discovering that this corporate form did not meet its needs" (48).

When Good left, Hyattsville set out to redefine what it meant for them to be a congregation. "When in the beginning the process was experienced by all as a revitalization, in the end it nearly tore the congregation to pieces" (49). As reported by Miller, Good had perceived the loss in an urban setting of natural forces which tended to unite a rural congregation. The response was that since we "live in a city that tends to being impersonal, let us give ourselves to Christian hospitality" (53).

This plea evidently did not resonate with the congregation, and after Good left, the responsibility to fashion a different structure fell upon sociologist and Anabaptist scholar Paul Peachy. What emerged was a congregation composed of fellowship groups with a "Pastorate" made up of the heads of fellowship groups. It "was charged with the spiritual care of the congregation. If a pastoral helper or counselor (pastor) was to be appointed, he was to serve and help the Pastorate" (71).

The new model was affirmed by the congregation, but not all participants were comfortable with the subservient role assigned to a pastor. Still they looked for a pastor. At first Mark Derstine served as "Congregational Coordinator."

When he perceived that pastoring was not in his immediate future, the congregation finally found Bob Johnson, who stayed four years; followed by Bob Shreiner, who stayed another four; and Alan Moore-Beitler, who left after four and a half.

In the meantime Hyattsville had become a dual-affiliated congregation, relating to both the Mennonite Church through Allegheny Conference and the General Conference Mennonite Church. (These were eventually to merge as Mennonite Church USA.) In this context, they were able to find Mel Schmidt, a blunt-speaking Midwest native who came to them from the large First Mennonite Church in Bluffton, Ohio, beginning February 1, 1994. He stayed as pastor until his retirement in 2003.

Schmidt perceived that on his arrival Hyattsville was "'a discouraged, burned-out congregation'" (143). One of his concerns was the revitalization of worship. He noticed that Cindy Lapp, an accomplished musician and a member at Hyattsville, was "singing professionally at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in downtown Washington" (144). He found it curious that Lapp was singing for the Episcopalians instead of the Mennonites and persuaded Hyattsville to establish a "Coordinator of Worship and Music," a part-time paid position. The eventual development was for Lapp to be licensed by Allegheny Mennonite Conference and later ordained as a minister on November 17, 2002.

The last chapter in Miller's book is devoted to Lapp and events leading up to her ordination. She was the first pastor ordained from within the Hyattsville congregation. Miller ends the

book with a benediction: "Thus, the past and the future of Hyattsville at once. Tradition enlivened by innovation, spirit imbued with grace, and with praise out of brokenness, we celebrate the body of Christ in the world in this time—1952-2002—and this place—Washington; Hyattsville—world without end" (162).

Miller also goes into detail on the issue of homosexuality. . . .

This quick survey of structural leadership issues overlooks other subjects included in the book: various mission activities of the congregation and its beginning to attract persons with other than Pennsylvania German backgrounds. Among these has been David Deal, who had received a Navy scholarship to study at Duke University. He became a conscientious objector and dropped out of the program, so he was called upon by the Navy to repay the scholarship. The congregation agreed to help him repay the debt.

Miller also goes into detail on the issue of homosexuality with an "Excursus" on the experience of Jim Derstine, who came from Pennsylvania and ended up at Hyattsville. His presence as a homosexual led the congregation to study the issue; eventually 94 percent voted to accept Derstine as a member.

In a footnote, Miller reports that Bob Schreiner, who was then pastor "had taken the matter up with the Conference Overseer, Paul Lederach, and . . . the two of them had agreed that the question of Jim's membership was pastoral and congregational, rather than an issue for the conference" (124).

Some left Hyattsville because of Jim's membership and others who stayed were also opposed. Other gays and lesbians have joined the congregation, and Miller reports "the Allegheny Conference has had continued concerns over Hyattsville's views and actions" (126).

These Allegheny concerns came out more sharply after the date in which the Miller book ends. Faced with unrest brought about by the merger of the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church and the emerging issue of homosexual practice, Allegheny was unable to maintain the "collegial" style which had originally attracted the Hyattsville people.

Five congregations left the conference, and a majority of those who remained voted to remove Hyattsville's official position as a voting member of the conference. Judy Nord from Hyattsville, who was a member of the Allegheny Leadership Commission, was not permitted to continue.

It appeared that some in the rural congregations felt they had been hoodwinked when Hyattsville was permitted to follow a practice which they did not approve, and it was time to call them to account. The action was not unanimous. I, for one,did not support it.

We may note on reflection that the issue of homosexual practice is one which has bedeviled most denominations, and so we're not alone. We may note also that the question of congregational authority versus broader perspectives is never fully answered. What seems ironic is that when Hyattsville appears to have finally achieved stability in congregational leadership, its relationship to the district conference is in jeopardy.

One other issue for Hyattsville I do not see addressed by Miller is that of intergenerational membership. He reports considerable fluctuation in membership during the congregation's 50 years and finds that Henry Jr. and Edna Brunk are the only charter members remaining. I wonder whether there are second- or third-generation members, or whether the younger people have all scattered.

Two comments about the volume itself. The book is designed as a 9 by 9 inch paperback. This makes it possible to display numerous family photographs in the margins but makes the book unwieldy. Also I found one glaring error: John Oberholtzer, the somewhat radical nineteenth-century minister in Franconia Mennonite Conference who helped to bring about a split in the conference, is identified as "Jacob."

Because he seeks to document every bump in the congregation's path, Miller's book may at times seem tedious to those with no background knowledge of Hyattsville. But for those who dream about what it means to be faithful in an alien context, the book is one to ponder whether or not the reader agrees with what Hyattsville has done.

—Daniel Hertzler, Scottdale, Pennsylvania, a longtime editor and writer, contributes a monthly column to the Daily Courier *(Connellsville, Pa.).*

At the End of Ethnic Mennonite Life

Michael A. King

Some Mennonite congregations, families, and individuals are living at the end of ethnic Mennonite subcultures. How we analyze or address our situations will differ; what I see in my contexts may not apply in others. But I do find myself forced, as pastor, husband, and father, to wrestle with the transition from ethnic Mennonitism to generic anabaptism that seems required in my settings.

Several factors have heightened my sense of needing to address this transition. Foremost is my experience as pastor at Spring Mount Mennonite Church. I was called to the congregation in 1997 as an interim pastor whose role, it was thought at the time, might include helping the congregation bury itself with dignity. Years of challenges, including deaths of key members, departures of younger participants, and leadership transitions, had weakened the congregation; its future appeared dim. But as often as we discussed burial in those early days, the congregation refused to die, probably partly because having its back to the wall generated new urgency to work at missional turnaround.

And to work at one huge issue: it was unlikely this

primarily Swiss-German Mennonite congregation could again thrive simply by drawing in more Swiss-German Mennonite members. We would somehow have to welcome participants from our local communities or die.

But how? The story is still being written. Yet at least two moves seem to have been essential to generating growth of community participation to the point that some Sundays a majority of worship participants were raised in settings other than Mennonite. One factor has been strengthening connections with community networks. A key move here has been to hire Don McDonough, himself raised in and part of such a network, as associate pastor.

The cover reminds me of being a young boy once so socialized into its alternate Mennonite country that I asked my father when I would get my own plain coat.

A second factor has been working at discerning this: What aspects of how Mennonites "do" church in Pennsylvania are rooted in a Swiss-German ethnic heritage and so should not be imposed on participants of different ethnic backgrounds—many of whom start out thinking Mennonite = horse and buggy?

And what aspects are part of the gospel core as viewed through the Anabaptist tradition that shaped but preceded the Mennonites who took their name from Menno Simons—the Catholic priest turned Anabaptist? To echo the Gentile versus Jewish discernment the apostle Paul had to engage in, what are the beyond-ethnic-culture factors with potential to be good news for persons of any background?

The need for such discernment was underscored again when recently I helped teach a course on Anabaptist history and theology offered in Pennsylvania settings often populated by Swiss-German Mennonites. At the outset I held up a copy of *The Merging: A Story of Two Families and Their Child* (Pandora Press U.S./DreamSeeker Books, 2000), by Evelyn King Mumaw. The cover shows my grandparents, Irvin and Cora King, in the classic plain clothing they wore throughout most their lives. Beneath them is my Aunt Evie, also in plain dress.

Just looking at that cover draws me back into still-living memories of growing up in that plain-dressing culture and all that such clothing symbolized. The cover plunges me back into images of growing up in the 1950s and 1960s as part of a community set apart, different, viewing those within its boundaries as members of the faithful remnant committed to live the ways of Christ and those outside primarily as those lost in a fallen larger world. The cover reminds me of being a young boy once so socialized into its alternate Mennonite country that I asked my father when I would get my own plain coat.

I had invited Don to supplement my lectures with perspectives of his own. I wanted him to do this because

Don is now a committed Anabaptist but became a Mennonite after growing up Lutheran. He is more strongly committed to being Anabaptist than whatever it means to be Mennonite. The world of my aunt's book cover is not in his bones. He respects my background but experiences it as a historical curiosity.

We expected the Anabaptist class that day to be maybe half ethnic Mennonites, like me, and half adult-choice Mennonites, like Don. I held up the cover as a doorway into my world and expected Don's recounting of how a Lutheran became Mennonite to be a doorway into his world. Then all of us would ponder what it means to work in congregations mixing persons raised in Swiss-German ethnic Mennonite settings with those raised in other communities and ethnicities.

To our surprise, no students had been raised in Mennonite families. They knew about that plain-dressing separated world, but, like Don, they knew of it only as what seemed to them a quaint echo of a bygone age. So Don and I had to refocus our presentations. Now we had to ask, What does it mean to be Mennonite if being Mennonite involves no Swiss-German markers or memories of a set-apart community?

But this is a question I've also pondered closer to home. In the 1970s, while my friends were marrying ethnic Mennonites, I married Joan, an American Baptist who has herself become a committed Anabaptist-Mennonite but, like Don, from outside my subcultural community. I, who had registered as a conscientious objector just before the Vietnam War draft ended, was adopted as in-law into a family which not only experienced its Christianity as blending nearly seamlessly into larger American culture but also included veterans of military service. They learned to love me often despite rather than because of my odd beliefs and Swiss-German love for potato and shoo-fly pies.

Our three daughters, now young adults, were raised in that mix of subcultures and attended both public and Mennonite schools. They have attended Mennonite churches all their lives. They have worshiped among Mennonites who still dress plainly. They have experienced learning through family funerals that in parts of their extended family even young people still dress plainly. They've heard my many stories of growing up in that different country.

Yet even as they understand that country better than those who have never visited it, it's not fully their own. Like the Anabaptist class in which no students were from Swiss-German Mennonite backgrounds, when my daughters visit my country, they are tourists respectfully studying it, not citizens fundamentally shaped by it.

Where then from here? Any answer requires discussion, not just proclamation. But a strategy that seems compelling to me is this: At least in some settings in which Mennonitism has become so stereotypically intertwined with ethnic cultural practices as to pose a nearly impenetrable barrier to newcomers, we may need to move from Mennonite to generic anabaptist values.

Here I am indebted to C. Norman Kraus. In "Anabaptist or Mennonite? Interpreting the Bible" (*Using Scripture in a Global Age*, Cascadia, 2006), Kraus says that "Anabaptism with a lower case 'a' is . . . an attempt to adapt and adopt the insights and values of sixteenth-century Anabaptism as a guide to the interpretation and use of Scripture in our twenty-first century American culture" (45). Kraus points to the many cultural forms global Mennonitism has taken and ways generic anabaptism can provide distinctive and unifying ways of viewing Bible and world even amid a dizzying array of shifting Mennonite cultural practices. Something like that is what I find myself working at implementing as pastor, husband, father.

There are basic differences between those of us who grew up in my Swiss-German Mennonite world and those raised in their many alternate settings that must somehow be named and worked at.

This is not to suggest ethnically influenced Mennonite practices lack value. It is not to disrespect those Mennonites, past or present, whose plain dress has meant to convey faithful following of Christ. At Spring Mount Mennonite, for example, we've aimed to celebrate the fresh contributions of people from diverse backgrounds even while continuing to cherish gifts of the plain-dressing tradition.

It is not simplistically to flee the name *Mennonite.* I myself have publicly declared my preference to pastor not, say, Spring Mount Community Fellowship or even Spring Mount Anabaptist Fellowship—but Spring Mount Mennonite Church.

It is not to suggest that any congregation or individual somehow exists above or outside of culture. Nor is it to insist that making *Mennonite* a more culture-bound term and *anabaptist* a name less tied to culture is the only or even best way to conceptualize matters; I myself experience these matters as a kind of riddle whose solution I've not yet fully found.

Nevertheless, there are basic differences between those of us who grew up in my Swiss-German Mennonite world and those raised in their many alternate settings that must somehow be named and worked at. Sometimes to be Mennonite is too easily equated with joining not only a way of understanding faith but also the subcultural expressions of that faith as they have emerged in tightly-knit communities of persons sharing similar immigrant backgrounds, histories, and often generations or even centuries of inbreeding. Then it is important to find ways to speak of core faith commitments that disentangle them from optional ethnic expressions.

This is why in my various roles I often find the vocabulary of a generic anabaptism helpful. Such a vocabulary can help those raised in settings

other than Mennonite to grasp what aspects of becoming Mennonite involve commitments to particular faith values rather than optional ethnic practices.

This is why I often feel impelled less to address Mennonite concerns intertwined with a particular ethnicity and more to ask Anabaptist-tinged questions like these: Where is right living to be found in today's complex and ambiguous moral cross-currents?

What does the body of Christ look like among those who find it more meaningful to commune in MySpace than Sunday morning worship services?

What does it mean to believe "But I say to you, love your enemies" should still shape how we view terrorists or war in Iraq?

And what might it look like to ask such questions from within ordinary lives planted among many subcultures, not only from within that country behind my aunt's book cover?

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

Paintings of Memory, History, and Light

Randall Stoltzfus

Most of my work, and *Flock* (illustrated here) is a good example, is meant to be open to interpretation in several ways. With *Flock*, even the title has a sort of triple entendre, providing permission to see either sheep, or people, or birds. Or all three. There is a fourth meaning that is important, a reference to the sort of texture found on rich velvet wallpaper or fabric. That is important, because it speaks to the material truth of the surface, which I feel I can count on even if all other meanings fail.

Flock, *2003, by Randall Stoltzfus, oil on panel, 30 x 48"*

When this sort of painting is successful, viewers usually choose an interpretation and are pretty adamant about it. With *Flock* there is that black mark in the lower edge of the painting left of center that is particularly figurative. I have been asked, "Is this Jesus Christ?" I have also been accused of painting Osama Bin Laden. Personally, I am more interested in the first interpretation, but I am fascinated by the strength and variety of convictions that emerge.

Not all the images get responses that are this specific. But most have sources this specific. Often those sources are biblical. My Mennonite upbringing supplies me with source material in other ways as well. Although most art critics don't know what I am talking about when I say that the burning figure in a particular painting is a historical figure from *Martyr's Mirror*, I am glad to have a rich reservoir of both narrative and faith from which to grow these images. The audience may take away what they will.

Above
Housefire,
2002, oil on linen, 72 x 84"

Left
Rapt, *2004, oil on linen, 54 x 58"*

—Randall Stoltzfus is a painter who lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. He was raised in a Mennonite household in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, and is the grandson of an Amish deacon. His evocative landscape paintings are haunted by memory, history, and light. More of his work can be seen at www.sloweye.net.

Cultural Agoraphobia

Why Young Postmodern Mennonites Struggle to Follow or Lead

David Landis

Two years ago I spent a week backpacking in southern Chile's Torres del Paine National Park. It boasted some of the most spectacular scenery I have ever seen: 5,000-foot vertical rock towers, mile-wide glaciers, and wind that knocked an Israeli military commander friend to the ground.

The final day of the trek was spent hiking across an expansive and monotonous field surrounded by gigantic beauty. As I walked hour after hour and my position seemed stationary in relation to the massive landscape, I had a vague feeling of panic and paralysis—a feeling sometimes referred to as agoraphobia. I felt like I was on an endless treadmill, overwhelmed and unable to make decisions to change my situation. I felt like a leader who could not empower myself to head in a specific direction.

My experiences as a Mennonite young adult (age 24) in postmodern American culture have expanded my understanding of the concept. Young adults are often described as transient, noncommittal, and apathetic. In churches across the country, the number of

participating young adults is steadily dwindling. This lack of engagement has often been interpreted as disinterest, deferment of responsibility, or general rebellion against tradition. I would guess that church leaders often feel the intensity of these disconnecting characteristics the most, as leaders feel responsible for movement within our culture and see a lack of successors.

I think we're scared to lead because it may hurt others.

After biking across the country this summer as the leader of a group of young adults, I understand better where these descriptions come from. First some background.

In ancient Greco-Roman culture, the *agora* was the marketplace, where an assortment of goods was available for choosing. Merchants would bring an array of products, greatly increasing the options for consumers and opening up the market. Over time, the word *agora* has become associated with open spaces, leading to the concept of agoraphobia, a fear of entrapment within that openness.

Our world offers the cheap consumption of a plethora of ideas, experiences, and contexts in which to theologically, philosophically, and ethically shape our paradigms and daily decisions. Within seconds, I can Google anything and get a listing of other people's perspectives on my inquiry. Inexpensive air tickets bring the world much closer by allowing a personal global exploration of my deepest fascinations. Blogger and Myspace show that we can all become publishers and add our two cents to the digital global conglomeration. Opportunities to learn from and participate in a global expansion have come into our houses, with greatly reduced prices compared to our grandparents' world. The postmodern marketplace of accessible ideas is open to many of us.

Accessibility is also a justice issue, whether the access is to information or opportunity. We often preach inclusiveness as the absolute will of God, not wishing to cut out any potential marketplace participants—as it's only morally acceptable for all options to be available at all times.

Postmodernism has an exciting ability to encourage us to engage people who are different from ourselves, but I am anxious about the way it seems to have played out in our culture. We seem paralyzed to act for corrective change within our new and often complicated understandings of the world. I think we're scared to lead because it may hurt others.

Bikemovement began when a group of young adults emerging from the so-called first postmodern generation wanted to foster movement and conversation in a church we perceived as tightly structured. Ours was an experiment to create a conversational, moving community attempting to define its participants' relationship with the church in today's culture.

We came with our experiences, dreams, hurts, passions, and apathies. We felt a lack of empowerment in the church and wanted to do something about it, maybe even by being leaders bringing about this change. At least we wanted to begin an adventure, a bicycle journey across the country. Even if its purpose was loosely defined, we were excited to go somewhere together.

And we did go many places, covering 3,385 miles by bicycle from Oregon to New Jersey over seven weeks. We visited more than 20 churches and connected with 62 cyclists on the cross-country journey. We shared our life stories. We yelled when we were angry and trying to express our ideals to each other. We had many ideas, options, and people to empower, and this process probably proved to be the most challenging.

Over the first few weeks, various arguments erupted regarding the true purpose of Bikemovement. Careful conversation over three weeks brought us to an agreeable haiku vision: *cultivating a relevant community through conversation*. It was empowering for us to define ourselves, even if the general phrase could be expressed practically in a thousand ways. Even though we hadn't empowered any specific options, we had at least committed ourselves to a definition.

Although many young adults struggle with commitment, it started to become an attractive paradox within our community. As we were crossing the Continental Divide in Wyoming and struggling through deep sand on an unknown dirt road, many of us were becoming discouraged. At this point, one disheartened yet persistent person piped up; she declared she was "committed to this road."

Strangely and quickly, everyone followed suit and repeated the phrase, a litany sounding like a group baptism. Reinforced and focused, we gazed down the long difficult road and proceeded together. Looking back, I wonder if our decision was made possible by only having two options, one of turning back and another to continue.

True young Anabaptist radicals need to emphasize community as a core value, and we pushed this concept to its fullest. A cycling journey at breakneck pace, focused on communicating our deepest struggles with religion and spirituality, requires the support of an incredible community. Community meant that we shared life stories with each other and strived to include everyone in all communication. Community was expressed as we cooked our meals and set up tents in the rain together. Community meant that we tried to critique each other while working for consensus in all situations. Community became volunteering to lead the pack to block the wind on our most challenging days.

Community also made it difficult to make decisions. With communal leadership being expressed as a value by some persons, those not included in decision-making processes felt hurt. It wasn't always possible or practical to have everyone involved in all decisions. Some were hesitant to trust others in responsibilities that included a lot of decision-making. The environment became a challenging

one in which to empower others to lead.

It's impossible to lead effectively without feeling adequately empowered. My own role became that of providing the overall coordination for a group of leaders, all with ideas and directions. The challenge was to channel all our energy into one direction: the East Coast. As many organizational systems needed to be created to continue moving, we were continually reminded that we were completely responsible for our structural development.

Growing up in an Anabaptist tradition, I have experienced power as a spiritual taboo.

The versatility of the word *relevant* should not be underestimated. This adjective from our shared vision statement is easy to love because it tells you that what you're doing is timely and important. But it doesn't tell you what to do. That's the part we all need to figure out for ourselves and choose to act upon. That's something young adults are craving—but struggling to approach, as we've experienced in Bikemovement.

In a world of privilege with endless options, it appears that choosing one option will eliminate all others. Yet if we shy away from a decisive perspective, we will ultimately strand ourselves in the milieu of our culture. We will become addicted to the feeling of being overwhelmed in our options, addicted to an agoraphobia that does not produce the leadership necessary to interpret the world around us.

The trick to countering this paralysis is to name the power we have in a way that allows us to trust ourselves and others as leaders. Although this seems like an obvious statement, it's one I have seen Mennonites and sometimes other Christians hesitant to embrace. Postmodern culture's default setting seems to be doing a good job at encouraging engagement, but it doesn't seem to be naturally promoting empowerment.

Growing up in an Anabaptist tradition, I have experienced power as a spiritual taboo. Power allows us to abuse others and implies a definite sense of pride. Having it seems to mean that we should throw it away, opening up space for us to serve others. My fear for the future is that the poor stewardship of this idea, combined with the postmodern array of overwhelming options, will make effective leadership in the Mennonite church nearly impossible.

To figure out what is relevant in the world around us, we need to spend time being relationally immersed in that world in a way that will allow us to wisely use the power we have been given. It's easy in a postmodern culture to stress the importance of understanding and trusting those who are different than us. The challenging next step is empowering each other to become decisive leaders in our contexts.

We need to hold each other accountable to implement decisiveness, even if it won't always be cheerfully received. We can decide to get a return on our initial investment from the marketplace of ideas, turning at least slightly against our agoraphobic culture to implement positive change in the world.

Looking back on my experiences, I realize that I must choose to lead and begin to redefine my religious culture. This personal and collective critique has reminded me that I need to be humbly aware of my imperfections, forgiving of myself, my peers, my culture, and my church community. Wading through this sea of options has been a struggle so far.

Comparable decisions to take the challenging road ahead await us all. I believe that many young adults who find themselves with an imperative to lead and act upon it will grow into a greater understanding of God's grace. Only by making the risky commitment to lead will we experience the joy and pain embedded in our journey, to move our world into the direction of the values that give us hope.

—David Landis, Harleysville, Pennsylvania, does not own a car and bikes everywhere. He works for Franconia Mennonite Conference in leadership cultivation and communication. Landis is looking for a graduate program that combines peace and conflict studies, cross-cultural education, and adventure travel.

Just Another Day in Paradise—or Philadelphia?

Steve Kriss

After students returned to clean out their desks and men from the community dismantled everything from the ballfield backstops to the roadside fence, an early morning crew with heavy equipment dismantled the boarded-up West Nickel Mines School in Bart Township, Lancaster County. It was carefully hauled away by truck to a landfill with no trace left behind or left along the way to be sold later by some strange entrepreneurial thrillseeker on E-bay.

During that same week (and too many weeks since), there was a series of murders in West Philadelphia's Kingsessing neighborhood with no way to remove the memories or bulldoze the buildings. The city's tally of murders went past 300 in the same week the Amish girls were killed by Charles Carl Roberts. The same week that Roberts' pastor at Middle Octorara Presbyterian Church suggested that this kind of thing, these kind of murders, this kind of senseless death doesn't happen in Lancaster County. It happens instead, she suggested, 75 miles east—in Philadelphia.

For the last year, I have made Philadelphia my home. I have heard the tales of how the city feels slighted, forsaken, and feared by its suburban neighbors. I have grown to understand that fear to some extent, having more locks on my house than ever. And the same week the Amish girls were killed I read in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* about how Philadelphia is poor, uneducated, and violent.

These are the sorts of things that happen in Philadelphia—an infant is the 300th murder; a five year old dies when a bullet finds her inside of her mother's car; two senior citizens are killed in Kingsessing accidentally; two 17-year olds die. It's just another week or two in the City of Brotherly Love.

He spoke of the Amish and the power of forgiveness. He dared us not to beatify the Amish but beckoned us to live that same life of powerful forgiveness in this city of violence and fear.

The Sunday after the shootings, I went to hear my pastor at Oxford Circle Mennonite Church, in one of the city's most diverse neighborhoods. He spoke of the Amish and the power of forgiveness. He dared us not to beatify the Amish but beckoned us to live that same life of powerful forgiveness in this city of violence and fear. All many of us could think of was how sad it was that these innocent Amish girls died in Bart Township, that they didn't deserve it. Pastor Leonard suggested that maybe this was a tipping point; maybe people would pay attention to gun violence now.

But months have passed since then, and still the Philadelphia death count continues to rise at an alarming rate. Except for those immediately affected, few people, anywhere, seem to care or even to have any sort of clue about what to do.

As a Mennonite Church USA staff person, for one of its Philadelphia-area entities (Franconia Mennonite Conference), I was stunned by our ability to coordinate efforts; of my credit union, Mennonite Financial, to disburse funds to help the Amish families; of Blooming Glen Mennonite Church to organize a prayer gathering; of Penn Foundation to compile a list of websites and resources for dealing with trauma; and of Mennonite Disaster Service's ability to corral counselors and set up funds.

I was stunned by the outpouring of compassion, by the willingness of hospitals to write off the care for the Amish girls, by the rapid collection of many hundreds of thousands of dollars. I don't begrudge any of it. In fact I am proud (at least as proud as Mennonite clergy should be) of how quickly we organized and helped and processed.

But I wonder, here in my Mt. Airy carriage house, what it would take for us to mobilize in any way at all in response to the violence that's escalating in this city. Mennonite Central Committee, along with leaders from Anabaptist churches here in Philly, hosted a Packing for Peace Conference just up the road a few weeks after the Amish shootings. It was an admirable

event, a first step toward equipping to be peacemakers. I was grateful for that.

But I am still so uncomfortable with how we don't seem to care for this city that lies at our communal doorsteps, lodged between the pristine farmland of Lancaster and the burgeoning suburbs of Bucks and Montgomery Counties. An old book that I've been reading about Quaker Philadelphia suggested that the peace church folks who helped establish this city emphasized inner piety rather than outward care beyond their own communities. It was an environment of religious tolerance and grace that led to a lack of responsibility and care. Eventually the fabric of the city began to come apart at the seams and now is increasingly ripped asunder.

So here I am living just blocks away from the historic Germantown Mennonite meetinghouse, within walking distance of Rittenhouse Town, the home of Willliam Rittenhouse, the first North American Mennonite bishop, whose legacy of meshing communication and church leadership I live within centuries later. And I am provoked by the memory of my pastor's sermon and his stirring assertion that what happened in Lancaster County might affect what happens to us here.

I hope Pastor Leonard was right. I hope we can find a way responsibly to care for this city that provides the impetus for high land values for those of us who live just beyond its boundaries.

And I hope we do it soon. I am not sure I can bear too many more readings of the crime report, of guns being pulled on persons walking a couple of blocks from my house at midday and before sunset. I've already ventured a look at housing beyond the city's limits.

It's not that I don't think a bit of fear and frustration about what has and is happening here is appropriate. I just hope that we can find ways to mobilize, even on behalf of Philadelphia, some of that embodied grace so movingly offered to the Amish in a situation that seemed only hopeless.

—Steve Kriss, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, is a doctoral candidate at Duquesne University who works with Franconia Mennonite Conference. He published an earlier version of this article in his Franconia Conference staff blog, www.franconiaconference.org/blog/category/staff-blogs/.

What I Knew When I Was Little and Didn't Know Anything

Renee Gehman

On a bead-strewn bedroom floor in Vietnam, my host sister and I quietly sort the pinks and the yellows and the rest of the hundreds she has just spilled, when out of nowhere 9-year old Thu Giang [*two ZAHng*] says, "Renee do you know that when I'm very little I'm not afraid of any animals?"

This invokes my skeptically raised eyebrow. After three months I've lost count of the times I've been clung to and whined at over the sight of not only a dog or a spider, but also a fish, an ant, and even a butterfly. But Thu Giang *insists* that her fear of the animal kingdom is only a recent development.

"Well if you weren't afraid of animals when you were little, why now?" I ask.

"Because when I'm little I'm not know *anything*!" Thu Giang exclaims, in a tone that says, "Renee, I know you're relatively new to Vietnam and still don't understand a lot, but surely at least *this* should be obvious."

Often the younger we are, the less we are assumed to know. It's nothing to be blamed for; it's just that intelligence is something that's supposed to grow over time, along with your feet and your hands. At age 22 I was born into Vietnam, and though both feet and hands entered this new world at their adult stages, my brain feels like it's had to start from scratch. The best way I've managed to describe this cerebral diminishing is to say I feel like a child again.

At age 22 I was born into Vietnam, and though both feet and hands entered this new world at their adult stages, my brain feels like it's had to start from scratch.

Jesus' disciples—frequent arguers over hierarchy in the kingdom of heaven—probably viewed children in a similarly derogatory light. Surely they were taken aback when, as they turned away some children, Jesus rebuked them, saying, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these." He even went on to say, "I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it" (Luke 18:16b-17).

In some way, according to Jesus, we must be like children to enter his kingdom. It's not an easy modification for someone like me, because while I have loved the Vietnam experience, I have not particularly enjoyed feeling like a child. But it seems that I—like Thu Giang, believing the development of an illogical fear coincided with her own personal growth and development of logic—am also guilty of backwards thinking. Several experiences here have reminded me of some important things I'd forgotten since I was very little and "didn't know anything."

It's Okay to Cry

In preparation for Vietnam, I challenged myself to see how long I could go without crying. Just in case I ended up floundering about in a sea of homesickness, I thought this precautionary measure might at least prevent me from speeding the drowning process with self-pity tears.

Then, less than a month into my term, the hard drive in my laptop crashed, rendering my 3-year's accumulation of treasured pictures, music, and documents an amnestic plastic piece of nothing. I actually thought I was okay with the loss, but when Thanh, our master of technology at the MCC office, confirmed that all was officially lost, the salty waters began to rise upon my unsuspecting eyes.

I was immediately furious. *Pull yourself together!* I screamed inside me, frantically fumbling for a mental flotation device that would raise me back into the realm of logic, where I could believe *There's no point in getting upset; there's nothing you can do now.* But as soon as Thanh left, the levees broke, the waters streamed forth. And I got carried away with this metaphor in an attempt to avoid coming right out and saying it: I cried.

I was disappointed about giving in. I've always strived to be strong and practical and resilient, and here I was—weak, vulnerable, and pathetic. And even though it felt good to purge myself of that sadness over my loss, I still am a little embarrassed to share this story. Because I grew up and reasoned that tears were bad.

Children cry when they're hurting. Unashamed of a tear-stained face, they don't care about washing the evidence away before others see it. And God does declare that his power is made perfect in our weaknesses. "Therefore," says Paul, in response to this, "I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12: 9b-10).

When I was very little and didn't know anything, I thought it was okay to cry.

It's Okay To Be Dependent

Soon after the death of my laptop, I got sick. Unable to hide it from my hyper-concerned host family, I was immediately drowned in unwanted pampering. Convincing them that in fact I did not need to go to the hospital was almost more draining a battle than that against the vomiting, diarrhea, fever, and aching body.

In college when I was sick, no one took care of me. As long as I was physically capable of collapsing on my bed, holding a tissue to my nose, and opening the child-proof cap on my medicine, I had no desire to involve anyone else in my healing process. Now this too I wanted to handle by myself, with my little remedy: shutting myself in my room and sleeping it off.

But this was not to be so in Vietnam. Even when I finally escaped to bed, only thirty minutes passed before the knocking on my door. I ignored it, but my host mother came in anyway, holding a cotton swab and a small bottle of oil with the face of an old Asian man on the label.

Before I could even protest, she pushed me down on my stomach, saying "Malaysia!" as if the bottle's origin would suffice as an explanation for the invasion of my personal space about to take place. Next I knew I was being rubbed down by something that smelled strong as paint thinner. Too sick to fight her off, I silently endured the oil and massage. When she began to karate-chop all of my tender muscles, I used what little energy I had left to stifle a scream. *Just let her do this.* I told myself. *It will make her feel better.*

But then a funny thing happened—*I* started to feel better. The smell turned from tear-inducing to invigorating. The pain in my muscles started to evaporate as the karate-chopping of the oil into my skin created a cooling-burning effect that made my whole body feel stronger. Even the nausea seemed to dissipate. When my host mother entered my room, I was annoyed, because I was sick and wanted to sleep. By the time she left, I felt completely restored.

When children are hurting, they run to their parents who can fix them and make them all better. The second a knee is scraped and the skin is bro-

ken the instinct is to run as quickly as possible to someone who can help. There is no pausing to attempt to mend the wound sans human aid.

After all, Jesus never told us to carry our own yokes and bear our own burdens. He welcomed the weary and invited us to do the same. And for all he talked about humility, isn't it interesting how much easier it is for us to see the spiritual value in serving than in being served? Because when I help others I usually feel good about myself, whereas the love and healing power of a helping hand that night was a humbling reminder that I can't do it all on my own, that I need others to help me through more than I realize.

When I was very little and didn't know anything, I thought it was okay to always depend on others for help.

When I was very little and didn't know anything, I thought it was okay to always depend on others for help.

It's Okay to Still Have a Lot to Learn

For homework, Thu Giang has to read an English story aloud to someone every night. Since I am the only native English speaker in our home, this listener role tends to fall on me. It is an ideal task for me, because I love being read to, and I have to admit—it feels good when she pauses in her reading and looks up at me expectantly, needing me to help her pronounce "owl" or "Macdonald" or "Cinderella."

On days she doesn't have school, however, there are no English books. One such occasion Thu Giang walked into my room with a Winnie-the-Pooh book in Vietnamese. She held it out, asking, "Can you read this to me?"

I hesitated, knowing my pronunciation would be terrible and my reading painfully slow. "Are you sure you don't just want to read it to me?" I offered. "I'll just read everything wrong."

Smiling, she said, "No, I want to hear you read it." I gave in, reminding myself that I needed all the practice I could get.

When I really wasn't sure how to say a word, Thu Giang pronounced it for me. I was almost positive she would get impatient with how slowly I had to read and stop me before the end, but she didn't. She patiently endured the entire 16 pages. When I finished, she asked me if I understood. I said no.

She answered, "Okay, I will tell you what happens." She went back through the entire book and explained the story in English

As much as I appreciated her help and patience, I was embarrassed and frustrated with my inability to read a simple children's book on my own, when I had been taking Vietnamese language classes for two months.

Even more frustrating to me than how little I understand of Vietnamese words is what I still don't grasp in God's word. For instance, how exactly would a little child accept the kingdom of God? I don't like the feeling of not knowing.

Then I watch Thu Giang, who plows right on through words she doesn't understand, and when she makes a mistake and I point it out, she simply corrects herself and moves on.

I know there has to be a balance between the adult in me whose frustration with ignorance inspires me to continue to search for understanding and the child in me who doesn't stress over the unknown but rather just continues to read and to live. But how do I find that balance, when my nature urges me to race as fast as I can from child brain to grown-up brain?

When I was very little and didn't know anything, I was unashamed by how far along I was (or wasn't) in the learning process.

Thu Giang, who wasn't afraid of butterflies till she grew up and "knew better," has become a sort of role model for me. Because somehow I managed to grow up and "know better" too, because I was strong and independent and venturing out on this promising path where I would volunteer and endure life outside the comfort zone, and grow even more.

Yes, all this is happening, but in surprising, proving-me-wrong kinds of ways. Thank you, God, for my broken laptop, my overbearing host mother, and 9-year old Thu Giang, who hasn't grown up so much that she's too old to teach me about entering the kingdom of God.

—*Renee Gehman, assistant editor and columnist for* DreamSeeker Magazine *is amid an 11-month term with the Mennonite Central Committee SALT program in Hanoi, Vietnam, where she is English editor for World Publishing House. She is loving Vietnam and feeling incredibly blessed to be a child in so many wonderful families (biological, Vietnamese, MCC, Salford Mennonite Church).*

Some Thoughts on Helping

Deborah Good

On a Saturday in October, I was scheduled for an afternoon phone appointment with a psychologist in Indianapolis. I had already completed a questionnaire and a battery of tests about my personality, skills, and interests. Now he was going to tell me what I should do with my life. To someone feeling like a child lost in a fluorescent-lit maze of grocery store aisles, this was good news—like Mom had finally turned up in the dairy section, or I had at least found a clear sign to the exit.

But I had lost track of time at a friend's house, did not have Doctor Fadely's number with me, and was still in the car rushing home five minutes after I was supposed to call him, when my cell phone rang.

"Hello? This is Deborah."

"What are you *doing*?"

"Uhh—"

"This is Doctor Fadely," said the voice on the other line with a chuckle. He was calling me to see I why I hadn't called him at our scheduled appointment time.

"Actually I'm rushing home to call you!" Some mixture of embarrassment and relief breathed through my nose. I pulled my car to the side and apologized; I had completely lost track of time.

"Well, that makes sense," said the doctor. "Because you can be kind of spacey sometimes . . . but we'll get to that later."

Gee thanks. Tell me something I don't know. For the rest of our half-hour appointment (shortened to 25 minutes by my delinquency), Doctor Fadely told me about myself. I'm intellectual, creative, independent, and relatively useless without more education. I have a lot in common with people in the arts, with geographers, with psychologists. I like to study people, he said. I am also a writer.

"You could be an artist very easily," he told me. "You're a creative arts person. You could go off into the mountains and write the first great novel of some sort and probably be pretty happy. You could work in any number of editing and journalistic fields—and it would work—but you shouldn't do that. Why not?"

"You could work in any number of editing and journalistic fields—and it would work—but you shouldn't do that. Why not?"

Well, tell me.

"You have a high need—fortunately or unfortunately—to help people. You would really like to make some kind of difference with people."

I need to help people. Yes, I suppose it's true: I am another compassionate do-gooder, just another city-church-raised liberal who wants to make an impact, maybe another white girl trying to make peace with my privilege by alleviating the pain of those oppressed and dejected for centuries. It's one way to live, but I'm not sure it is the way to a better world.

My appointment with Doctor Fadely went on and got more specific, giving me something like direction for my future—a fascinating experience. And I was left with words spinning in my head, words I likely inherited from a family tree of teachers, preachers, counselors, and missionaries: *help, serve, change lives.*

To help. The entry in the dictionary is as long as my hand, from top to bottom. What *does* it mean?

Is it an older sister leaning over a child and his homework book, using apples to explain arithmetic? Or maybe helping is a volunteer in Kosovo, handing out blankets and listening to stories so awful the words themselves are crying?

There are the retired Mennonite men I worked with for a week in Louisiana, hanging drywall in a hurricane-wrecked house and replacing a tin roof. There's me on my way to the subway, pulling a quarter from my pocket for a beggar. And there's Rosa Parks, sitting when she was supposed to stand, inciting a movement, changing the law of the land for hundreds of thousands of black Americans. Or my grandparents, who moved their young family to Ethiopia and started a Bible school.

Helping is big and small, personal and structural. It can be arrogant; it can be kind. Sometimes it is both at once. It brings some good, some

harm—usually one more than the other, usually in more ways than we can predict at the time. It can cause dependency. It can perpetuate inequality. It can be *power over* instead of *power with*. It can insult, incite, prove officious. These are not new ideas.

One thing I do know about helping: I should never pretend I know what is best for another person. "One is extremely lucky if one knows this for oneself. . . ," said social worker Alan Keith; "however much you can feel and think with and for another, it is [their] problem and not yours. You don't have to face what [they are] facing. You may think that you have, or are, but you don't know." Like I said, these are not new ideas: His talk, titled "The Art and Science of Helping," was given in 1963.

Five years later, in 1968, my parents moved to W Street in northwest Washington, D.C., just a few blocks from where Martin Luther King's assassination had brought riots and fires to the city streets four months earlier. They would spend their next two years living at Friendship Flat, a youth community center begun by the Mennonite Church and staffed by six volunteers who lived above it.

In a conversation I had with my dad years later, he reflected that Friendship Flat did much good for the neighborhood youth. It provided stability, trusting relationships, activities that kept them out of trouble. But it also perpetuated racist stereotypes and an unhealthy dependency on the volunteers, who were foreigners—most of them white and from the country—on an all-black city block.

"It was hard for me to clearly legitimize our being there," he said. "I imagined the larger neighborhood looking in on us. Why were these six young people coming in here? What was their purpose? Unlike an institution providing a clear service—like a school or a clinic— Friendship Flat was very informal. Yes, we provided nice activities, but who said the neighborhood wanted those activities in the first place?"

I share some of Dad's skepticism about our efforts to help and serve others. Often to help other people is to have power over them.

I share some of Dad's skepticism about our efforts to help and serve others. Often to help other people is to have power over them. I'll say that again. Helping places me in a position of power. This, of course, becomes especially tricky cross-culturally and cross-racially.

Several years ago, I did some substitute teaching at a small high school in the neighborhood of Columbia Heights, near my childhood home in Washington, D.C. One day, we read a segment from Richard Wright's *Black Boy,* in which a white man from the North offers young Richard a dollar for food, but Richard refuses to take it. After reading, we discussed the story.

"Was it wrong for the man to offer him a dollar?" I asked.

"No," thought the students.

"Then why did Richard refuse to take it?" Because it hurt his pride, said some. Because the white man was arrogant. Because the white man didn't know him. Because it's hard to accept help.

"Generally, do you like it better when you help others or when other people help you?" We went around the circle, and most of us agreed it felt far better to help than to be helped.

"In your lives, are you more often the 'helper,' or are you always receiving help?" With the exception of the young mothers in the circle, I was the only one who felt I spent more time helping others. I rarely must bend my pride to accept help, yet this class of mostly Latinos did so regularly. I observed how these very dynamics were playing themselves out, poignantly, as we spoke. I, only a few years older than some of those in the class, was the teacher, and they were the taught. I was white. They were not.

As Doctor Fadely suggested, I will likely spend much of my life "helping people." I know this will always be an imperfect art, but I hope to do it sensitively, creatively, and in the context of well-balanced relationships—while always keeping an eye on the larger structures in which real change happens. I hope I learn to accept help as often as I give it.

Last year, while my dad was dying of cancer, he and I (along with our whole family) relied on others' help more than we ever had before. Some friends worried that they didn't know the right thing to do or say. But again and again, I was grateful when they let me know they were there anyway—even when I rarely returned their letters, calls, and e-mails.

Perhaps more than anything, helping is when we remind one another that none of us is alone in this big world, and that whatever happens today—whatever changes or does not change in a difficult situation—we will be there tomorrow, too.

—Deborah Good, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, is a writer, editor, and middle school classroom assistant. If you have thoughts on helping, if you ever feel like a child lost in a grocery store, or if you want more information about her experience with a career psychologist, she can be reached at deborahagood@gmail.com.

The Chaos of God

Jody Fernando

From 30,000 feet above the earth, I cannot help but notice the human need for order. Roads extend in every direction. Houses neatly line neighborhood streets. Fields are partitioned into angled squares. Everything made by human hands stands out from the world around it, distinguished by its carefully plotted construction and development.

Yet amid this human-created order, I am struck by the seeming chaos of the God-created nature surrounding it. Roads stretch for miles in perfectly straight lines while rivers twist and wind and curve. Buildings sit at 90-degree angles to each other while mountains ascend and descend unpredictably. Cornfields boast straight rows of neatly planted crops while forests sprawl in every direction the wind blows. Seashores cradle the curves of land while swimming pools sharply square off backyards.

Here in this airplane, I find myself attempting to create some of this order within my own heart. I am returning to my hometown because a lifelong friend's father has just died. His death was neither neat nor ordered. The intricate order of the medical world could not conquer the chaos of his body. He suffered greatly.

He left a young wife with three children. They were like my own family, and I returned for a moment to weep and share at least one of these chaotic days with them. The questions surge. *Why a fatherless child? Why such deep disappointment? Why more chaos?*

As I grasp for answers to my questions, I notice that up here in the clouds, chaos looks different than it does down there. As humans, we create neat replication after neat replication. Houses. Roads. Swimming pools. Cornfields. They all have straight lines, neat angles, and smooth surfaces.

We easily recognize that nature's chaos is capable of creating immeasurable beauty. Why, then, is it so hard to glimpse beauty in the chaos in our own lives?

To be considered valuable, they must not be broken, or have holes, or be damaged in any way. We mass-produce them, then use them to help tame the chaos around us. In a word, we choose to call these replications "order."

Long before our own replications, God created us. He also made winding rivers. Jagged mountains. Shadowy forests. Raging winds. Endless seas. They have crooked lines, uneven angles, bumpy surfaces. We consider them valuable as wilderness because they were simply created. They live through brokenness, holes, and severe damage. Sometimes they die—but are always recreated anew. In a word, God chose to call his replications "good."

Indeed, human creations pale in comparison to God's, and if we ourselves tried to apply God's rules of creation to our own, we would most likely end up calling it "chaos." We don't necessarily see it as such when we look at a tree or mountain, but all of the elements lie right in front of us. We easily recognize that nature's chaos is capable of creating immeasurable beauty. Why, then, is it so hard to glimpse beauty in the chaos in our own lives?

So seems life to me this day. God's rules of order contrast starkly with my understanding of them. What I perceive as chaos, God intends to be order. A life cut short is also the opening of a closed heart. Deep disappointment is also hope in growth. A father dying is also a child returning home.

With our straight roads and our cookie-cutter neighborhoods, we have subtly fooled ourselves into believing that human order itself can straighten out the chaos. And yet, as the currents of human need rage, nature reminds us that our understanding of order is messed up. It reminds us that power is completely out of our hands and that our sole job is to trust the hope of creativity amid the chaos, not to straighten out the lines.

—Jody Fernando is a free lance writer and teacher from Indiana. Her love of contemplating life over airplane windows has recently been restrained by the vivacious presence of her two-year-old daughter.

A New Story

Noël R. King

This is a new story, one that has never been told before.

Ah, but hasn't every story already been told? you ask me?

And I say that yes, every story that has been told has indeed been told, but this one has not.

I see I have lost you.

I am baffled, too. I have no idea how a story could be told that has never been told before, but it is inside me now, begging to come out.

So here it is.

Once upon a time there was a story that had never been told. It sat around for years, around many campfires, plenty of bars, and even more living room parties. It just sat there, simply waiting for that perfect time to be told.

It never came.

The second Ice Age did, though, and then another Big Bang.

It still wasn't time. There was no time.

And that was the problem.

This was a story without time.

How can you possibly tell a story if there is no time?

There you have it. There is a story that has never begun and will never end. It is timeless. Thus, it can never be told.

And this is it.

The End

—*As circumstances warrant, through her Turquoise Pen column*

Noël R. King, Scottsville, Virginia, reports on strange and wonderful things, including stories that just sit around campfires, fruitlessly waiting to be told.

Prayer Meetings

They sat in rows
on folding chairs
and listened to the preachers and
the deacons try to explain
what Paul meant in Ephesians.
It seemed important to know
what Paul meant in Ephesians.

Can I have a LifeSaver?
he whispered to his mother
who reached in her purse
without looking and handed him
the half-spent roll.
The next one was pale yellow.
He had hoped for a red one
or at least a green.
It seemed important.

—*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.*

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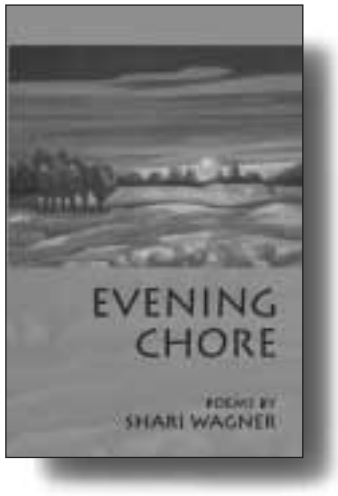

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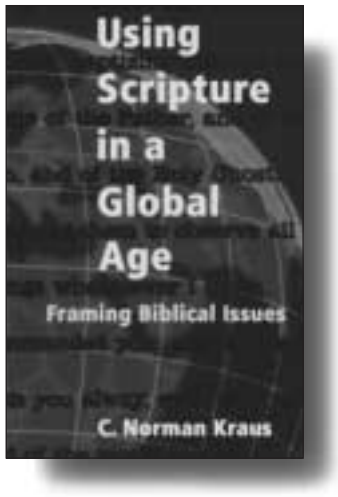

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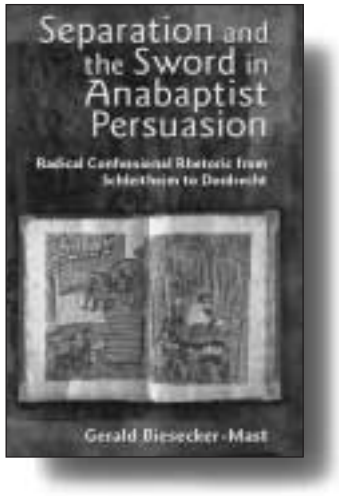

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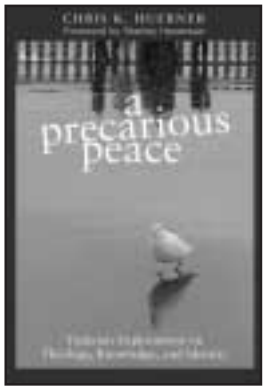

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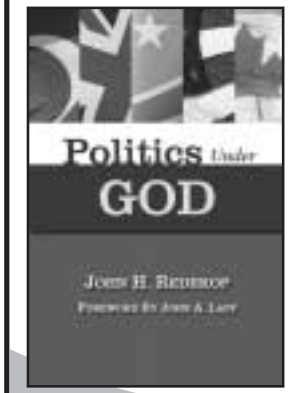

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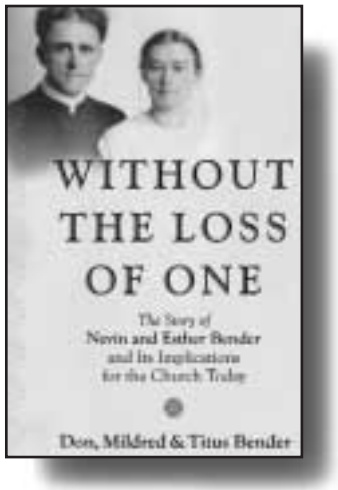

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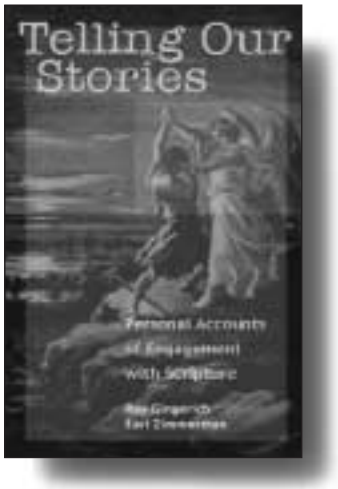

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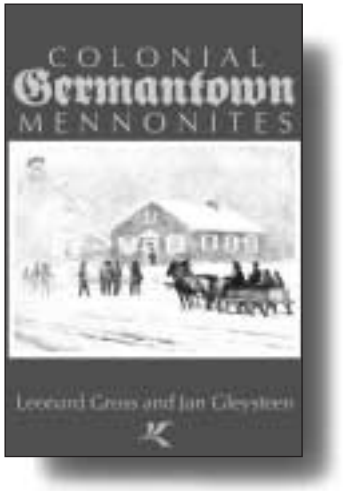

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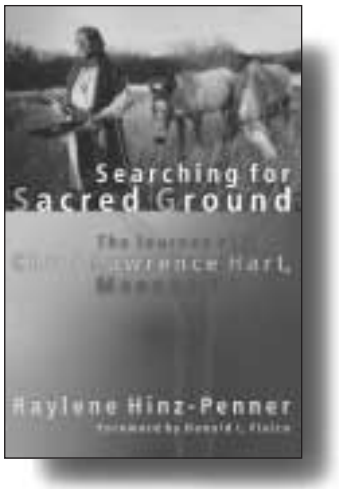

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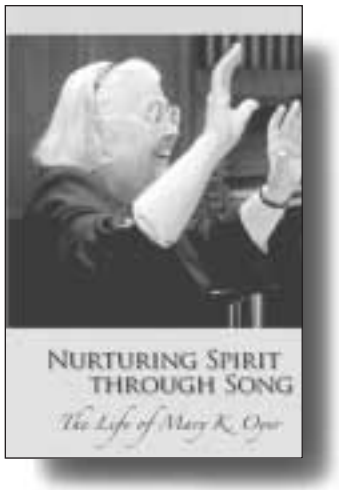

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(Un)happy, in Love

The nice thing about loving a city and not a man
is that the city never wonders,

"Is this my future that I've found,
or are we just messing around?"
"Will this relationship limit me?"
"What if she flees?"
"What if she stays?"
"Who is this person, anyway?"

A city is a generous lover,
a master of polygamy
who accepts love as practical,
intractable,
sweet to touch,
never too much,
a flash in the pan
for the soul of man,
quick to fall,
unpredictable,
and anything but trivial.

I've lost things to this city:
my girlhood (as a lover should),
my fear of clear affection,
rejection of hope for
the open door of certainty.

But dumbly, numbly,
with my future for a cover,
I leave a perfect lover.

I promise to come back
and love again
unhindered with plans,
which I might do and do well,
but maybe this is a final farewell.
I am too smitten to admit that
either could be true.

But the worst thing about loving a city and not a man
is that the city never wonders.

—M. Christine Benner, Summit, New Jersey, suffered an emotional parting with Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to attend graduate school in the English Literature department at Drew University.