

WRITING WITHOUT THE 'PROTECTION OF ANGELS': NOTES FROM THE MIDDLE VOICE

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As a plainly-dressed six-year-old, I was fascinated with our neighbor woman's jewelry and her make-up, particularly her red nail polish. I often wondered how my nails would look if they were transformed by the color red. One day in the first grade at our local Mennonite elementary school, I wondered no more. I colored my fingernails with my new bright red crayon. When we stood to pray before eating our lunches packed by our mothers, a few of the students called the teacher's attention to the forbidden color on my nails. She seemed dismissive at first, but then she said, «If she's not satisfied with how God made her nails...» My memory trails off at that point, but I do remember that I felt guilty, condemned, and different from my classmates. I hadn't realized I was dissatisfied with my nail color. I only knew red was beautiful.

Later in the year, over-attentive female students scrutinized my coloring and printing. My coloring was out of the lines, and my printing was «turkey scratches». However, on the night of the annual fall open house, I couldn't wait to show my parents my very own writing. We walked around the block walls looking at the lined paper torn from orange Golden Rod tablets holding our printing. That night, for the first time, I saw my writing in comparison to my peers. And it did, indeed, look like scratches in the dirt. Even the teacher told Mom and Dad that the printing efforts were scratches. One feeble attempt at making me right-handed made her abandon the attempt to «correct» my left-handedness.

The frustration experienced because of my less than acceptable attempts to form letters and the realization that I did not measure up to my peers in this activity were rendered insignificant, however, when it came to opening books and learning to read. When I sat at the small table in school with the other children in my reading group, I was a Bluebird. I took pride in the fact that the Bluebirds were the best, smarter than the Redbirds, smarter for sure than the Yellowbirds. Everyone knew that. What everyone knows now is how deficient and how damaging to some young children those specialized groups were.

However, membership in the Bluebirds gave me the leg up I needed in order to feel a part of the reading community that was reading aloud from the Dick and Sally series at school and Golden Books at home.

Frustration and alienation also were experienced on the playground during recess. Tradition dictated that the popular older students kicked off recess time by choosing the students who would play with them. The best-liked male students chose the boys they liked for the baseball game to be played during recess. They reserved the lesser liked boys for the last chosen. The best-liked female students were more ruthless. They chose who could play with them and did not include those whom they didn't like. On this particular day, as usual and for reasons unknown to me, I was not chosen. I wore a brown-checked gored dress that flared out widely around my waist when I twirled around in a circle. I liked to twirl when I wore that dress. I remember clearly telling myself that day that I would not always dress like this with my hair in two braids and my legs encased in brown cotton stockings. I would not have known how to phrase it then, but I believe I decided that day that I would not always be the one acted upon; I would someday be the one to act. I also didn't realize then that I was already taking the first step away by making that promise to myself. And so it was that at six years old, I began to leave my home community¹.

I spent the rest of my school years at the local public school. There, on the playground, no one chose sides. Students were free to play with whomever they wished. At the end of the first day of second grade, I got off the bus and ran in our long lane to tell my mother the good news. As I had noted the differences between myself and my home community during first grade, I now noted the differences between myself and the larger world I occupied. I especially dreaded the first day of junior high when I had to wear a prayer veiling or «covering» to school. What did my friends think about me suddenly showing up in that white netted marker of my difference as a woman, never mind that I was now «protected by the angels»? Surprisingly, no one said anything. They, no doubt, expected it as common behavior among our people. But it mattered to me that my difference was now worn on the outside in a much more pronounced way than ever before.

Many years later, I left those external clothing markers behind me. However, *difference* branded my insides. Since the public Mennonite religious community

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1. Mary Jean Kraybill, an Associate Dean at the University of Chicago, eloquently expresses the tension between the Anabaptist individual and her community: «Everything mattered. No action or activity was inconsequential. While I learned the valuable lesson that how one lives one's life matters and that actions must be consistent with beliefs, I also assimilated an attitude of ongoing anxiety that my behavior was not acceptable. I was obsessed with what others thought of me» (*Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 72-2 (2003), p. 221).
 2. This phrase is based upon the deep conviction of members in the Amish/Mennonite community that young girls and women wearing their prayer veilings are protected by the angels from rape and other crimes against their bodies. This belief is strengthened whenever a story circulates that a would-be rapist confessed the chilling effect the prayer veiling had on his plans for the girl. To whom or why the so-called rapist is confessing is not a part of the story.

«is defined by men, not only in the absence of, but *against* [italics and emphasis mine] women»³, those Mennonite women with ties to their Amish heritage⁴ are not far removed from the church Bishop's mandates, and the memories weigh heavily. My childhood and adolescent memories of culture are different than my academic peers, and I have gaps in cultural experience. For example, we had no television in our home, and when I played at a neighbor's home, I was instructed by my mother not to «watch TV». Suffice it to say, I got quite a bit with side-long glances. Nonetheless, when colleagues discuss shows from the fifties and sixties, I often know of them by name only.

When I was eleven, my parents purchased our family's first radio. My parents allowed only two religious stations beamed into our home, and of these two, they preferred a satellite station from Moody Bible Institute in Chicago. From that small white rectangular box, I heard speakers' voices identify themselves as being associated with various colleges. I admired the way they used words. I admired their stories of adventures in far-away places. I longed to attend college. For several years during my adolescence, I requested and received a variety of college catalogs advertising that semester's offerings. I pored over them, constructing the ideal semester's workload based upon the available courses that caught my interest. Because high school was expected and college was forbidden in my home, this dream did not become my reality for many years. At the age of 51, I completed my doctoral degree in English with a concentration in Rhetoric and Composition.

3. RUETHER, Rosemary Radford: «The Feminist Critique in Religious Studies», in Thomas E. Dowdy and Patrick H. McNamara (eds.): *Religion: North American Style*, 3rd ed., New Brunswick -NJ, Rutgers University Press, 1997, p. 170.

4. Three Anabaptist (an historical name meaning *rebaptizer* given to those ancestors of the present day Amish, Mennonite, Hutterites, and some groups of Brethren who broke away from the state church during the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century) groups reside in my home community. However, for the sake of clarity in this article, I use *Mennonite* to refer to both conservative Mennonite women and Mennonite women. The only exception is in Table 1 where I keep the groups separate in order to more clearly chart their beliefs regarding education. A brief explanation of each group follows. The Old Order Amish, who broke away from the broader movement in the late seventeenth century citing worldly practices as a primary reason for their separation, are distinguished by their languages of oral Pennsylvania Dutch for everyday use and written and oral High German for use in worship, plain dress and hairstyles, transportation of horse and buggy, formal education to the eighth grade, resistance of modern electric conveniences, and religious practices. During the 1950s, many Amish members left their communities in the northeastern United States and formed a new group known as the Conservative Mennonites. These people, known as «the conservatives,» felt they had found a biblical compromise between the strict Amish group and the more worldly Mennonites, offspring of their ancestors who remained Mennonite and did not join the Amish movement. Within the Conservative Mennonite community, the regulations are not so all-encompassing; however, they exist unwritten, and members are expected to observe their congregations' regulations rigorously. The Mennonite community, however, is more concerned that members believe in community values, daily discipleship to God, and their peace stance. They are not likely to be concerned with regulating lifestyle in terms of modern conveniences, transportation, and education.

1. FINDING THE «MIDDLE VOICE»

The Irish poet Seamus Heaney, in his poem «Making Strange,» writes of three characters,

«the one with his traveled intelligence
and tawny containment,
his speech like the twang of a bowstring,» and the second, «unshorn and
bewildered
in the tubs of his Wellingtons,
smiling at me for help,
faced with this stranger I'd brought him»⁵.

The third character functions as a bridge between his countryman and the stranger:

«A cunning middle voice
came out of the field across the road
saying, 'Be adept and be dialect,
tell of this wind coming past the zinc hut,
call me sweetbriar after the rain
or snowberries cooled in the fog,
But love the cut of this traveled one
and call me also the cornfield of Boaz»⁶.

Called by the «middle voice» to love both the strange and the familiar, Heaney writes,

«I found myself driving the stranger
through my own country, adept
at dialect, reciting my pride
in all that I knew, that began to make strange
at that same recitation»⁷.

On one level, this poem certainly can represent the impact of three individuals meeting each other: two who are from very different cultures and one who is familiar with both. The value of this reading is that this third individual is often instrumental in negotiating understanding between cultures. On another level, these three persons represent the multiple other voices residing within one individual who is a member of more than one discourse community, in this case, Mennonite and the academy. Stepping from one community into one that is very different may cause an internal clashing of communities so that a Mennonite woman, for example, may experience this clash as having to choose between two communities: the one in which she grew up and the one in which she is finding membership, the academy. More broadly, how

5. HEANEY, Seamus: «Making Strange» in *Station Island*, New York, Farrar Straus Giroux, 1984, p. 32.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., p. 33.

do community leaders, of both genders, construct lives for themselves out of the connection/dissonance they may experience, both for those who become Mennonite scholars and those who avoid higher education? Heaney provides a third voice: the voice of the «middle» to negotiate the two communities so that one can retain membership in both. When did I first hear the call of my «middle voice»? And when was I first compelled to «drive the stranger through my own country»? When did I first hear the call of my «middle voice»?

Looking back, I believe it all began one fair spring evening on campus. As student editor for the literary journal at my university, I looked forward to that particular evening's event, which featured a prominent poet from the Midwest. After the poet's reading, I was scheduled to hold an interview with him for inclusion in the next publication of our journal. I took upon myself the responsibility to bring the refreshments and serve them after the poetry reading.

The night of the poetry reading was also the night for a televised superbowl game, and many in our audience were eager to return home and watch the game. Consequently, when the reading was nearly finished, I began setting up the refreshments in the far back corner of the room. To accomplish the task of making the drink, I needed to get pitchers of water from a tap outside the room. The door creaked ominously. Several of my professors were seated toward the back, and I checked carefully to see if they appeared bothered by the interruption. The last time I came through the door and into the room with a full pitcher of water, the poet stopped his reading. He looked out over the audience and said loudly, «Will someone stop that woman?»

The next moments seemed to slow down and are as clear as my kitchen windows scrubbed by my grandmother with ammonia water. I remember leaning against the back wall mentally forcing myself to stay and to not deny this was happening, for I wanted to leave –to flee– never to return and pretend it never happened. I remember deciding to stay and serve refreshments to the guests.

Later, while guests enjoyed the refreshments, the poet made his way to my side. He did not apologize, but his eyes met mine as he explained that he just had not been able to bear the distraction. I apologized for distracting him, and then I said, «But above all that, you humiliated me, a student learning the ways of a campus, in front of my peers and my professors». He turned on his heel and walked away. Later, while another professor stood by during my interview with the poet, the large and ancient recording machine spun its wheels and let out an unearthly whine. The poet, clapped his hands over his ears, screamed obscenities, and left the room. I never saw him again.

This incident illustrates the misunderstandings that can occur between those familiar with the academic community and those coming from very different home communities, in this case, Mennonite. Refreshments were uppermost in my mind, as a good Mennonite woman, and from that community's perspective, my obligation to these guests was to have their refreshments ready

8. Ibid.

as soon as the reading was finished, and not a moment later. This value to work industriously in the common labor of serving food, however, collided with the academic value to revere silence during the individual labor of reading poetry. On the one hand, I was a Mennonite woman who, by that community's standards, should have been at home with my family that evening. On the other hand, I was present at the event because I was a student editor of a literary journal, and, by the academy's standards, I had work to perform. In the middle, was a Mennonite student who brought homemade desserts to the poetry reading. But in the poet's «that woman» was held all the tension of these two opposing circles in which I was a member. I was only «that woman». Suddenly, I did not seem like such a good Mennonite since I had stepped out of community boundaries and into the academy. And I did not seem like such a good student either since I had not realized how insignificant refreshments are to a poetry reading.

I have been in the classroom as instructor several years since that event. And I understand far better now the collision of cultures that night represents. This was a literacy event where a poet stood before his audience, mediating his written words through an oral reading. He read carefully. The audience listened carefully in hushed silence. This audience was given a snack after the reading, but food is secondary to the project at hand. It is doubtful that someone came to this event to eat snacks. The audience came to be served poetry. In the academic world, literacy events such as these are highly esteemed. It is not the sort of event where the audience comes and goes at will. As a professional now, I understand this. I have been in situations where I have not appreciated undue distraction from the literacy task at hand. And I remind myself that those creating the distractions are acting from the standpoint of backgrounds in differing communities between which bridges can be built.

In the years since this incident, I have been motivated, in large part, by a wish to understand how and why this incident, and others like it, occurred and still occur. And I often find «myself driving the stranger/through my own country»⁹. Importantly, this «stranger» not only represents those outside the Mennonite community, but she represents the part of me who is a part of the academy. On this journey, I, the part of me who bridges two worlds, take my academic self through the country of my Mennonite self «reciting my pride/in all that I knew» and «[beginning] to make strange at that same recitation»¹⁰.

2. MENNONITES AND EDUCATION

Many Mennonites in my home community of Oak Glen¹¹ are suspicious of a liberal arts education beyond high school. John A. Hostetler¹², raised in

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. I have changed the name of this community to protect the privacy of these individuals.

12. John A. Hostetler has served as expert witness in a number of legal cases involving educational and environmental problems encountered by the Amish. He fully supports their cause in

the Amish church and currently a professor emeritus of anthropology and sociology at Temple University, states that to the Amish, education «signifies ego advancement, independence, and cutting the ties that bind one to the community of faith and work»¹³. This belief is in stark contrast to other Mennonites who not only have college degrees but have established several Mennonite colleges with many Mennonite professors. The following table juxtaposes these three groups in the Oak Glen community with their views and practices concerning education for both males and females.

Formal Education as Influenced by Oak Glen Communal Religious Beliefs

	Amish	Conservative Mennonite	Mennonite
VIEWS	Suspicious of and forbid higher education	Suspicious of but allow higher education	Welcome/encourage higher education
GRADES ATTENDED	Grades 1 – 8	Kindergarten – Grade 12	Kindergarten – Grade 12
COLLEGE	No college permitted	College is allowed No overt encouragement Little assistance State universities with emphasis on career training	College is expected Overt expectation Assistance given Mennonite colleges with emphasis on liberal arts

While more conservative Mennonite members in Oak Glen may be suspicious of education, more and more members are allowing their young people to attend college and even attending college themselves. However, most are particularly suspicious and resistant to Mennonite colleges. They believe these colleges are sites of untruth, Biblical error, and rampant rebellion. Some of the more important issues alarming these Mennonites in Oak Glen are that the more liberal Mennonite college professors allegedly no longer believe in the virgin birth of Jesus, in the necessity of «being saved» or dependence upon God for salvation, and in the sinfulness of homosexual lifestyles. While a few will send their children to these colleges, many do not. In this new century, their children will, rather, attend public university. This is a far preferred site for post-secondary education since it is clearly the world –a separate community from these Mennonites. Thus, it does not threaten as powerfully as a college

resisting higher education even though he did not choose to live under these constraints himself. I found the following quote compelling: «While under cross-examination by Attorney John William Calhoun of the attorney general’s office in the state of Wisconsin, he turned his swivel chair closer to me and asked: ‘Now Professor, don’t you think that a person needs to have an education to get ahead in the world?’ I pondered the question and replied: ‘It all depends on which world’» (HOSTETLER, John A.: «An Amish Beginning», *The American Scholar*, 61-4 (1992), p. 561).

13. Ibid.

proclaiming its Mennonite-ness, yet not remaining true to its heritage (in their eyes), and swallowing up their children in compromise.

Another phenomenon taking place and being commented upon is that a number of Mennonite women of Oak Glen are attending college as non-traditional students, and a significant number attend the university where I teach. An articulate Mennonite female student in my composition class said to me during office hours, «It would be hard to write like a Mennonite. For anyone it would be hard, but especially so for us Mennonites. It's hazardous». This student, like me, did not know Mennonites, such as Julia Kasdorf, Di Brandt, and Cheryl Nafziger-Leis, were writing about growing up Mennonite until she attended college. This same student has written a few poems in the past but keeps her voice muzzled for fear someone will hear it, and, as a consequence, be heard by the community. That voice, she instinctively knows, does not belong to the community as she knows it¹⁴.

3. MENNONITES AND FUNDAMENTAL VALUES

The student above knows that writing content is not to focus on one's self for fear one will be perceived as prideful. Pride, in whatever form it may appear, whether negative or positive, is condemned by the Mennonite community, which labels it the central sin. However, community members have not rid themselves of it. In fact, the stories of Mennonites, while often rampant with brave young men refusing the military draft as well as men and women dying for their faith, often include stories «of bishops who rode roughshod over congregations, forcing others to humble themselves, while too often they exercised power in ways that seem to have shown a dangerous form of spiritual pride»¹⁵. They include stories of «fathers who bowed low in church and before Caesar but terrorized their wives and children at home»¹⁶. Even so, the pride, or its perception, is avoided. Anything else violates a fundamental value: «The individual is not the supreme reality»¹⁷. Rather, essential to the Amish/Mennonite heritage and to self-understanding are communal exile, suffering, and struggle. The following teaching is deep in the psychological makeup of a Mennonite: «If other people praise you, humble yourself. But do not praise yourself or boast, for that is the way of fools who seek vain praise [...] in tribulation be patient and humble yourself under the mighty hand of God»¹⁸. Indeed, even as a young girl, I knew clearly the instructions on what

14. Within this community, what is good for the community is valued above what is good for the individual. This value is in sharp contrast to the emphasis on the individual in the academy. Often, the Mennonite female student has no other recourse than to either reject the academy or reject her home communal circles.

15. SHOWALTER, Shirley Hershey: «Bringing the Muse Into Our Country: A Response To Jeff Gundy's 'Humility In Mennonite Literature'», *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 63-1 (1989), p. 25.

16. *Ibid.*

17. WALTMAN, Gretchen H.: «Amish Women: From Martyrs to Entrepreneurs», in Maria Julia (ed.): *Constructing Gender: Multicultural Perspectives in Working With Women*, Belmont-CA, Wadsworth/Thomas Learning, 2000, p. 37.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

to read and how to write. As Andrea Fishman argues in her study of Amish school literacy, writing is expected to be about facts and/or spiritual truths. Thus, writing is required to stick to accurate details and to avoid giving voice to fiction/lies.

One Mennonite female student recalls a visit from an educated Mennonite relative to their small home when she was an adolescent. Her mother informed the relative that this daughter loved to read and was quite good at it. The relative expressed approval and interest in this phenomenon and promptly asked the participant to identify her favorite books. This student remembers clearly her painful attempts to recall authors and titles of biographies and other non-fiction works. She was both ashamed to admit to this relative that she loved reading fiction and ashamed of herself that she was not sticking to the truth about her reading practices. She was fortunate, however, to grow up in a home where reading fiction was considered a legitimate activity for leisure. She internalized this permission as a private affair and felt that telling, even a visiting relative in their home, was making the permission public and could, as a result, bring shame to her home¹⁹.

4. GRIPPED BY FEAR

I join Julia Kasdorf who, after she published her first book of poetry *Sleeping Preacher*, felt «gripped by fear». «All the while», Kasdorf writes in *The Body and the Book: Writing from a Mennonite Life*, «I wondered where that fear comes from and whether those of us who try to write from our experiences in traditional, closed communities are especially prone to it²⁰». Kasdorf continues, «Because there have been so few representations of Mennonites in mainstream literature, new publications naturally create some anxiety about issues of textual accuracy as well as author intent and authenticity -including her membership status in the community»²¹. For the Mennonite women who have ties to Amish traditions, the long-regulated Amish value of pleasing others dies hard. To write, therefore, with the possibility of communal displeasure is a fearsome task. My poetry may include inaccuracies in details for the sake of creating the truth, secrets cracked wide open, and flaws in Mennonite characters who may not appear like heroes but perhaps more like sinners with no sign of salvation in sight. With fear and trembling I make this writing available to my community. However, in spite of this tension, I will not write a moral to my story, shun writing about the self, avoid fiction, censor my writing for signs of weakness in Mennonite women, and will not sacrifice an authentic representation of this community at the altar of treasured common beliefs.

As a Mennonite female writing about Mennonite women, will I need to leave my Mennonite community or my home completely? Or will I be silenced,

19. Elizabeth Coblenz, interview by author, transcript, Canton, Ohio, 5 August 2000.

20. KASDORF, Julia: *The Body and the Book: Writing from a Mennonite Life*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001, p. 40.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

rendered invisible, by this community? I remember well, when I first imagined my dissertation, one of my mother's friends confronted me at the back of the church: «Are you able to do this and still cook supper for your husband and children? And what will you say anyway?» The expected negative answer to her first question was written on her face. Kasdorf articulates both the blessing and curse arising as a result of negotiation: «Cultural minorities like Mennonites, who carry a memory of persecution and feel their identity to be always endangered, see in the voices of imaginative writers like me the promise of preservation as well as the threat of misrepresentation»²².

Thus, it is not only in the broader culture that silencing of Mennonite voices can occur. The silencing, including the misrepresentation, of Mennonites by Mennonites is a powerful way to manage deviant voices. Not mouthing weakness erases stories, stories rich with events exposing the emotions of a people. In addition to gaining approval and recognition for «mouthing» communal beliefs, dire consequences may result, consequences that render a perspective invisible. Ironically, while Amish/Mennonites often perceive silencing as something caused by outsiders, much of this perception has to do with the ways in which they separate themselves from the world, the historical silencing they have experienced and internalized as a group, and the way they experience strong, yet conflicting, emotions of simultaneous pride and shame concerning their own religious cultural practices. Kasdorf reports that «like other groups, [Mennonites] are capable of violating the interests of others in order to protect a sense of self, especially a collective self»²³.

5. FINDING A MENNONITE STORY

As I mention earlier, it took entering college for me to learn of my own culture's writings of its roots²⁴, to find the Mennonite story and my part in it. I well remember near the end of my undergraduate schooling when I entered a creative writing class and found a Mennonite poet in our course text writing about the Mennonite life. I went to a place where I could read in private and read every poem she wrote in the anthology. I did not know other Mennonites wrote poetry. I did not know other Mennonites experienced such intense emotion about anything, let alone growing up Mennonite. Something very deep inside began rising to the surface. With the encouragement of the professor, I began to write. I began to let myself experience emotion about being Mennonite and about being a Mennonite woman. I began to remember. I began to see the story. More importantly, I began to see that I was a character in the story. Coming from a cultural tradition where fiction is not allowed, emotional personal writing is suppressed, Bible reading is privileged and where, as in the white mill workers' community Heath studied, the Bible «was believed to be

22. *Ibid.*, p. xii.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

24. Alice Walker reports that it was only in college, in 1970, that she first heard of Zora Neale Hurston, and then only Hurston's name (Chris).

the actual work of God and was taken literally, word for word»²⁵, a Mennonite woman may not only find it difficult to tell a story but to even, first, feel that she is a part of a story. And, indeed, this must come first.

Prior to taking this course, my coursework and my religio-communal life occupied two separate worlds, but at this juncture, for better or for worse, the two worlds I occupied began to move towards each other. One evening during class, we were given the assignment to write a Ten Minute Spill Poem –a poem in which we spilled out our work in ten minutes time. The following poem was the result:

«When she comes in from picking blackberries
Mother's hands are streaked red and stained with juice
Like the bleeding sweet Jesus
In the picture on the living room wall.
Father's voice rough and graveled pierced like thorn needles
Threw her tumbling down the cliff of his words
Gathering wounds as rolling mass gathers stones.
Some large, some loud; some shale, some shrill.
All penetrated her softness.
She said he did not know what he did.»

While our family, as good Mennonites, did not have a picture of Jesus hanging on the wall, he was certainly ever present in our home -hovering about- suffering and bleeding for us. In return, we were instructed to obey, be true, and be proven faithful to the end -to be submissive Mennonite females who obey the will of God and man.

Speaking to contemporary Mennonite women directly, Di Brandt writes:

«I grew up in a church, as most of you did, in which the men sat on one side, and the women on the other. And all the talking, all the official words, were said by men. And the women, what were they doing? They were spending most of their energy subduing their children, keeping them quiet. And their own inner voices, their need to speak. Hiding their women's feelings and perceptions, covering their heads in deep shame»²⁶.

Traditional Mennonite history is male gendered. It is a history of our heroic men. Since traditional themes of war and its resistance have been played out for the most part with male characters, stories and writings about and by women have been largely excluded. This exclusion influences the ways Mennonite women know, believe, and do their writing and reading –with domesticated, unofficial, and often silenced voices. Our stories as women –as Mennonite women– are not so much about war and its resistance although we are actively concerned about this theme also. Rather, our stories have to do with stretching

25. ZINSSER, Caroline: «For the Bible Tells Me So: Teaching Children in a Fundamentalist Church», in Bambi B. Schieffelin and Perry Gilmore (eds.): *The Acquisition of Literacy: Ethnographic Perspectives*, Norwood-NJ, Ablex Publishing Company, 1986, p. 55.

26. BRANDT, Di: *Dancing naked: narrative strategies for writing across centuries*, Stratford-Ontario, Mercury Press, 1996, p. 55.

free past our bound-ness –past the forbidden areas of speaking one’s mind– and with uncovering shamelessly the efforts to gain that which has been denied: studying for a formal education, finding release from household duties in order to write, to name but a few. Thus, to find that one can be a part of a story, and then that one can tell that story is heady business indeed. Carolyn Heilbrun argues, «There will be narratives of female lives only when women no longer live their lives in the houses and the stories of men»²⁷. For the Mennonite woman who chooses to leave communal confines, stretching free includes reaching back.

Some time ago, I was invited by a Mennonite woman to her church to speak on a Sunday evening. She requested that I present my academic work on Mennonite women’s recipes. Since this was also the church in which I grew up, it was an experience I will never forget. I keenly remember the 1950s when somber black-suited men seated on the platform and gazed down at those of us in the audience who, in turn, looked up at them for direction. The altar, located below the platform and between the leaders and the audience, was rarely touched by either the leaders or the lay people except during times of communion which was held twice yearly. But on this night, my grandmother’s quilts were arranged on the platform. Her large stainless steel mixing bowl and wooden rolling pin dominated the altar along with her recipe collection. And a woman took a leadership role, standing not on the platform, but at the lectern placed on the same level as the audience. My husband and daughters served cookies, made from my grandmother’s recipe, to the audience, which was a full house. I spoke in plain language, negotiating my academic work and my home community. I showed overheads of recipes and letters from women they knew. Afterward, several men attempted to articulate their amazement that a common recipe could represent their cultural values in a way they recognized as true. And women clustered in small groups discussing how recipes they used compared to the ones I had used as examples. It was an evening when the sacred became profane or everyday, and the profane became sacred.

Perhaps in this way the church becomes more like a woman’s kitchen where, according to Sue Bender, a woman with graduate degrees from Harvard and Berkeley who lived with two different Amish families for several months,

«[n]o distinction was made between the sacred and the everyday. Five minutes in the early morning and five minutes in the evening were devoted to prayer. The rest of the day was spent living their beliefs. Their life was all one piece. It was all sacred –and ordinary»²⁸.

I remember the solemn weekly occasions when Mennonite men, responsible for the running of our lives, told us what to wear, how to wear it, what songs

27. HEILBRUN, Carolyn G.: *Writing a Woman’s Life*, New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 1988, p. 47.

28. BENDER, Sue: *Plain and Simple: A Journey to the Amish*, San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1989, pp. 50-51.

we could sing, how we should sing them, what we should read, how we should read, and how and when to write. With many Oak Glen Mennonite women attending college, change will occur and is occurring even as I write this article. What are their voices saying? Can we in the academy hear them?

6. RESISTANCE AND NEGOTIATION

While Mennonite women work hard to find their voices, «outsiders,» have sometimes struggled to hear these voices in the midst of the silence. Silent discourse is a powerful force and keeps the outside at bay. Kasdorf writes that «the absence of literary activity has hidden Mennonite hearts and minds from the curious gaze of others. In the absence of published fiction and poetry, outsiders have no access to the experience and imagination of the community»²⁹. Outsiders also seldom have access into the inner workings of the Amish/Mennonite community.

Kasdorf wonders if perhaps this «refusal of previous generations to publish imaginative work was another kind of cultural resistance, borne of distrust and of a fear that literature would somehow expose the interior life of the community –or of the individual– and thereby make them vulnerable to violation»³⁰. Several years ago, many former Amish people, who still did not darken the doors of theatres, purchased tickets to see the movie *Witness*. These viewers experienced tension both while watching the movie and then reporting what they saw to others who did not see it. On the one hand, they wanted to view themselves on screen, to see that, at last, someone had got it right. There is a comfort in knowing that a community is known and understood. On the other hand, they watched carefully for signs in the movie to prove what they had known all along -outsiders cannot and will not get it right. There is also a comfort in knowing that a community has kept its secrets. Danger threatens when a community is revealed and vulnerable. One Mennonite woman, following a church service the morning after she saw the movie, commented to a group of other women who had not seen the movie: «I never saw so many thin women around a quilt before»³¹. Relieved laughter ensued. For this group of insiders at least, the outsiders had, once again, not got it right.

Some educated Mennonite female writers are using the emotive language of media such as stories, drama, sculpture, poetry, and song to express and arouse emotional responses towards the subject(s). For example, in her poem, «Houses», Shari Wagner writes about three sisters who hide homemade necklaces under their dresses.

«The second sister dreams of rooms that lead into rooms no one has ever seen. Even the closets are larger than the bedroom she shares with her sisters. She can breathe in this house with places no one will see as she hides her only necklace –a

29. KASDORF, Julia: *The Body...*, op. cit., p. 170.

30. Ibid.

31. Clara Sommers, interview by author, transcript, Canton, Ohio, 5 July 1996.

string of safety pins she dares to wear beneath her dress to school. She places the necklace in a drawer inside a drawer and when she takes it out there are rubies the color of her mother's climbing roses no one can take away»³².

Mennonite women who hear this poem turned into song by Carol Ann Weaver often identify with the sister's emotional experience of desire and longing mingled with the required denial of certain material possessions as well as the emotions experienced with these losses.

Also denied are certain vocations, higher education, and sexual expression. *Quietly Landed?*³³, a musical dramatic work based upon the writings of Mennonite, Conservative Mennonite, and Amish women, includes several real-life accounts of Mennonite women's musings which include Mrs. H. E. Weis, who tells us that she, as a Mennonite pastor's wife, has no first name. She says aloud, «Sometimes I wonder what I would be doing if ...», and her voice trails away. Stories abound of young women wanting to remain in high school to fulfill the dream of being a teacher. Instead, church rules at the beginning and mid-twentieth century state that they must quit school and hire themselves out to families needing a strong hand around the house. One of the actors states with strong feeling: «I couldn't go [to high school]. That was it». Other women spoke of how their cape dresses³⁴ hid their sexuality. Another woman spoke of the hard work raising a family and filling the traditional woman's role: «Three weeks after the canning was done, the twins were born. One week later, their father left for [church] conference.» These women concluded that «[w]e need God in our own image». This represents a significant turn away from the primarily referential language of traditional Mennonite texts.

7. MENNONITES AND WITCHES

On March 23, 2000, I gazed into the waters of the canal in Alkmaar, Netherlands as my daughter's friend told me that in this canal «Mennonites and witches were drowned» in the sixteenth century. What, I wondered, is the connection between Mennonites and witches? In his article «Between the Devil and the Inquisitor: Anabaptists, Diabolical Conspiracies and Magical Beliefs in the Sixteenth-Century Netherlands», Gary K. Waite writes that «intersections [exist] between the heresy of Anabaptism [the historical name given to the ancestors of contemporary Amish and Mennonites] and the supposedly even

32. WAGNER, Shari: «Houses», Performed by Carol Ann Weaver and Cate Friesen, *Journey Begun*, World Records, 1999.

33. *Quietly Landed?* By Carol Ann Weaver, Carol Penner and Cheryl Nafziger-Leis. Dir. Cheryl Nafziger-Leis, St. Jacobs Schoolhouse Theatre, St. Jacobs, Ontario, 4 November 1995.

34. A cape dress is the traditional garb for Amish and some conservative Mennonite women and is worn when they become members of their local congregation as adolescent girls. It includes a shirtwaist dress with an additional cloth worn over the bodice in order to provide more modesty to a woman's breasts. Any woman or young girl who has just become a new member of the church knows well the difficulty and frustration to pin this cloth just so for a good fit. It is a labor-intensive task, and I well remember vowing to myself that I would never wear one again once I left my parents' home.

greater apostasy of demonic witchcraft»³⁵. Although Waite goes on to state that of all the revolutionary religious movements occurring in the sixteenth century, «Anabaptists were the least caught up in magical beliefs or practices,» he also argues that «at the level of officialdom [...] the prosecution of sixteenth-century Anabaptism and of magical deviance had much in common»³⁶. I couldn't help feeling some measure of amusement at the mental picture of a Mennonite witch.

However, and more soberly, does speaking through the middle voice imply that one may be both witch in one community and Mennonite in another? In one world, a Mennonite woman is one with the quiet in the land. In another world, she is no longer surrounded only by insular circles designed by male religious leaders who define *community* by those who obey their rules, thus, including certain members but also excluding others. Within this community, what is good for the community is valued above what is good for the individual. This value is in sharp contrast to the emphasis on the individual in the academy. Often, the Mennonite female student (turned witch perhaps?) has no other recourse than to either reject the academy or reject her home communal circles.

Shirley Hershey Showalter writes of her grandmother who grieved the loss of her child, the poet, who lived somewhere in Alaska in poverty. The realization that he could live without family, Showalter reports, was far more difficult to bear than the knowledge that he lived in poverty. «The Mennonite intelligentsia has oft lamented the departure of so many artistically inclined young people, and rightly so; this leaving has been a great loss»³⁷. However, Showalter states that formerly this loss has only been determined in terms of the price the community pays in losing these young people: «Seldom have we recognized that those potential artists have also paid an exorbitant price -the loss of their roots and their nourishment»³⁸. As Showalter points out, «[o]ne who leaves the community, especially when consumed by hatred or rebellion, also loses perceptive power»³⁹. She then quotes African American novelist Toni Morrison who writes, «when you kill the ancestor you kill yourself»⁴⁰. Sadly enough, in order to write their stories, Mennonite students, particularly those with ties to the Amish community, often must leave their home circles.

In the Oak Glen community, however, women primarily remain confined within their domestic space working cooperatively with each other and the

35. WAITE, Gary K.: «Between the Devil and the Inquisitor: Anabaptists, Diabolical Conspiracies and Magical Beliefs in the Sixteenth-Century Netherlands», in Werner O. Packull and Geoffrey L. Dipple (eds.): *Radical Reformation Studies*, Aldershot-England, Ashgate Publishing Limited, 1999, p. 120.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 140.

37. SHOWALTER, Shirley Hershey: *Op. cit.*, p. 23.

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*

40. MORRISON, Toni: «Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation», in Mari Evans (ed.): *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation*, New York, Anchor Books, 1984, p. 344.

church to serve their community. Often this lifestyle is romantically depicted by both outsiders and insiders as simple «with simple rhythms», as quiet «with quiet hope», as earthy «marked by the features of a working woman [...] where broad shoulders and large hands and strong arms and sturdy backs are beautiful», and as religious «marked by the features of a religious woman [...] where head coverings and uniform styles and Bibles and hymn books are lovely»⁴¹. Alma Hershberger, a woman who left the Amish church as an adult, writes with a poetic turn:

«Amish woman is a flower blooming in the Amish country in the history and in the presence of their people. She is the flower of the true humanity and blooms with love, pain, beauty and sorry. She is a flower cultivated with a gentle touch, with a hand from heaven»⁴².

While Gretchen Waltman states that the chief role of Amish women in their community is «to please others»⁴³, Hershberger is not quite so broad in this definition of Amish woman's role: «God created woman to please a man, for a companion and to give birth, a flower that radiates a glow of love for her people and hope for a better future for the young and for the generations to come»⁴⁴. Waltman observes that persons leaving this community often have a variety of responses to their upbringing including placing distance between themselves and the community but still respecting it, romanticizing it as in Hershberger and Stoltzfus, while others are embittered.

When some Amish and Mennonite women make the decision to leave their community, they enter the broader society often with no driver's license, no modern clothing, and a limited education. This is especially true for an Amish woman, and the last two may be true for an Oak Glen Mennonite woman. One woman, now in her mid-eighties, speaks about those days long ago when she decided to leave the Amish community: «I felt so sorry for my parents. They wanted me to be baptized so badly. So I did, not really knowing what I was doing. I didn't realize then that I would pay for that decision for the rest of my life. I couldn't pass the tests; it seemed nothing I did was right. It was either my shoes, my hair...» (her voice drifts off)⁴⁵. She states that for a short time, after leaving the Amish church, she was not welcome in her family's home. It took a much longer period of time for her many siblings to warm up to her, and many of her first cousins, who were like siblings, never did speak with her again. A few, she says, even seemed to go out of their way not to speak to her when they saw each other in town. Later, the same day of my interview with her, I sat at supper in an Amish home where I discovered during conversation that one of the elderly men is a cousin to this woman. When I told him of her recent

41. HERSHBERGER, Alma: *Amish Women*, Danville-OH, Art of Amish Taste, 1992, p. 9.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

43. WALTMAN, Gretchen, H.: *Op. cit.*, p. 43.

44. HERSHBERGER, Alma: *Op.cit.*, p. 14.

45. Martha Kurtz, interview by author, transcript, Canton, Ohio, 10 March 2002.

illness, he commented that he has not seen her since they were both quite young and that he should visit her. Then he said, «Is she still so independent?»

8. MENNONITE WOMEN AND CONFINEMENT

In contrast, many Amish and Mennonite women who choose to remain in the community, come to see their boundaries as borders around their contentment, not as binding them⁴⁶. Stoltzfus records that one Amish woman she interviewed has made a «decided refusal to dwell on what her life might be like if she were not Amish.» It is not that she has given away all rights to personal preferences, writes Stoltzfus, «or that she never thinks about other ways of being and doing. She does. She just doesn't dwell on them»⁴⁷. Although the case is made by some women with Amish background, who have since left it, that within the confines of this lifestyle are an abundance of choices⁴⁸, these choices are limited, limiting, and may, in some cases, be perceived as holding women hostage. This is particularly the case when decisions are made after community discussions among women, among men, between husbands and wives, and between church leaders and church member. Once the decision is made, communal conformity is expected and required. Those who do not conform, either by resisting the appropriate behavior within the community or by leaving, are confronted by those in church authority⁴⁹.

Louise Stoltzfus, another woman who left the Amish church as an adult, records this story told by an Amish woman she interviewed. One Sunday morning, a visiting minister preached the main sermon. During this event, he asked the audience this question: «'Who has the most important role in the church? The deacon? The minister? The bishop?'»⁵⁰ In a dramatic move, he turned to face the women, seated together on one side of the room, and «proclaimed, 'No, it is not the deacon, the minister, or the bishop; it is the mothers with babies on their laps who have the most important task in our church.'»⁵¹ Stoltzfus reports that this woman told her that the entire room became silent while «[m]others with babies on their laps snuggled them a bit closer. Fathers nodded their heads ever so slightly. Grandmothers dabbed at their eyes with handkerchiefs.» Stoltzfus then declares «[t]o be a mother is a high and holy calling»⁵². Many women present that day felt highly blessed to be pointed out in such a way by a church leader. However, for the married women whose homes have not been blessed with children, for the single women, and for those married women with children who are desperate for a way out of the

46. HERSHBERGER, Alma: Op. cit.; STOLTZFUS, Louise: *Amish Women: Lives and Stories*, Intercourse-PA, Good Books, 1994 and WALTMAN, Gretchen, H.: Op. cit.

47. STOLTZFUS, Louise: Op.cit, p. 57.

48. HERSHBERGER, Alma: Op. cit. and STOLTZFUS, Louise: Op. cit.

49. STOLTZFUS, Louise: Op. cit.

50. Ibid., p. 64.

51. Ibid.

52. Ibid.

never-ending cycle of labor, these words may be a cloying blanket placed over their faces, which, when inhaled, takes their breaths away.

Because these Amish and Mennonite women know clearly what they are getting into when they join their churches with unmistakably assigned roles for them as women, they are often perceived by scholars, even by scholars with a feminist perspective, as being «empowered by ways other than earning high salaries and promotions»⁵³. Donald B. Kraybill, a Mennonite male scholar, argues that Amish wives, ironically, have greater control over their work and daily affairs than do many modern women who hold full-time clerical and nonprofessional jobs. Unfettered by the pressure to succeed in a career, Amish women devote their energies to family living. And while their work is hard, it is *their* work and it brings as much if not more, satisfaction than a professional career⁵⁴.

Indeed, it is their work. They are not permitted the higher education necessary for a career. They are not permitted a professional career. This is the only work they have. Even if an entrepreneurial woman conducts a business on the side out of her home, her husband still expects her to cook supper for him that evening. And the church tells her to keep her business small so that it does not interfere with the family and community roles for her⁵⁵. Thus she is sheltered, preserved for communal purposes.

On one of the first pages of her book, Hershberger states her purpose: «Hope this will answer many people's questions about the Amish women and realize that the Amish people are real people too»⁵⁶. Early in the book, she includes this description of a «real» Amish woman with explicit instructions for the Amish woman's body parts:

«An Amish woman's head of hair was given to her for her glory.
Her mind is to think and teach her children right from wrong.
Her eyes are to see that her children do no evil.
Her nose is to smell the aroma of the food she prepares. To know when her baby needs a diaper changed.
Her mouth is to give her family affectionate kisses.
Her ears are to listen when a child cries in need.
Her hands are filled with tender loving care and hard work.
Her heart beats for peace.
Her knees are used to kneel in prayer for the whole world.
Her feet carry her to take care of her responsibility.
Her body is given unto her husband with love. She gives birth for an extra pair of helping hands on the farm.

53. WALTMAN, Gretchen, H.: Op. cit., p. 57.

54. KRAYBILL, Donald B.: «Plotting Social Change Across Four Affiliations», in Donald B. Kraybill and Marc A. Olshan (eds.): *The Amish Struggle with Modernity*, Hanover, University Press of New England, 1994, p. 73.

55. WALTMAN, Gretchen, H.: Op. cit.

56. HERSHBERGER, Alma: Op. cit., p. 3.

She is a walking flower in full bloom. At the end the flower will die. She leaves good memories behind; Her [sic] family will miss her»⁵⁷.

Laboring under this image, many Amish and Mennonite women do not know the unfettered life as described by Kraybill. For example, a study of health risk factors utilizing a sample of Amish and non-Amish adults in Holmes, County, Ohio found that a significant number of Amish women (46.7%) reported feeling depressed, and Amish women (30.6%) reported that anxiety interfered with daily function in their homes⁵⁸. Arguments such as the one made by Kraybill are arrived at by viewing Amish and Mennonite women from the outside in, through the lens of a professional male. By looking from the inside out, we can begin to construct a variety of emotional responses.

Where do we start in order to hear the voices of Mennonite women and other women entering our classrooms for the first time? In her keynote address at the 2000 Rhetoric Society of America conference⁵⁹, Patricia Bizzell argued that a major point of contention among some scholars today, has to do with the role of emotion. Bizzell states that researching the emotions of research subjects and recognizing the powerful link between research subjects and the researcher's emotions brings an essential truth to the research. She continues by calling for «the acknowledgment of the multiple functions of emotions and experiences in defining one's relationship to one's research, [which is] a departure from traditional methods»⁶⁰. In the June 2, 2003 issue of the *Mennonite Weekly Review*, a weekly newspaper, Julia Kasdorf, acknowledged by the Mennonite academic community as one of their poets although she left the Mennonite church many years ago, «argued for a more personal point of view»⁶¹ at Bluffton College while speaking at a historical society meeting. As the director of Pennsylvania State University's master's degree program in creative writing, she states that «[t]he personal is more complicated, but more enriching [...] We must include more of the personal in our scholarly writing»⁶². Our writing, then, has the potential to be rich with the emotions of the women who experienced them. And we can begin to understand how someone can find a middle voice, without breaking ties with the home community, in order to make a place for herself in the academy.

Mennonite women's lives have been informed and defined by their male-dominated religious communities which in turn carry collective memories of oppression and suffering, including death or exile at the hands of those in the

57. Ibid.

58. FUCHS, J. A. et al.: «Health Risk Factors Among the Amish: Results of a Survey», *Health Education Quarterly*, 17-2 (1990), p. 205.

59. Patricia Bizzell's address is now published as «Feminist Methods of Research in the History of Rhetoric: What Difference do They Make?», *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 30-4 (2000), pp. 5-17.

60. Ibid., p. 13.

61. KASDORF, Julia: «Poet Calls for More Personal Approach to Writing History», *Mennonite Weekly Review*, 2 June 2003, p. 7.

62. Ibid.

outside world. Thus, female Mennonites, both past and present, experience a significant «double burial»⁶³ when their experiences are not visible in official society. «Those who do manage to develop as [...] thinkers are forgotten or have their stories told through male-defined standards of what women can be»⁶⁴. This occurs not only because often men write the public texts, but also because men are the readers as well of the private texts written by women. Thus, when a Mennonite woman tells/writes a story, it may be labeled un-true or made up, and in this community, what is made up is a lie. Since lies are not tolerated and are sinful, the stories become absent in the community as well. Recognizing our traditional Mennonite history and how it has shaped the Mennonite world view including gendered roles of Mennonite males and Mennonite females is a start. Discussing and negotiating alternate ways to inform and define the contemporary Mennonite community is another important step. These are significant starting points for the Mennonite community in taking responsibility for initiating empowering change for Mennonite women.

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63. Anderson, Maggie, comments to the author, Kent, Ohio, 2 November 2001.

64. RUETHER, Rosemary Radford: Op. cit., p. 170.

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