Pacific Northwest Mennonite Historical Society Newsletter

Fall 2011/Volume XX

PNMHS Spring Meeting Presentation

Everyday Mysteries

By Lee Snyder

Let me begin with a Mennonite upbringing and the white frame Amish Mennonite Church, which still stands at the corner of Powerline and Diamond Hill Road, out amidst the rye grass fields and within the shadow of the Cascade range which border the Willamette Valley.

The church house, as we called it, stands there at the intersection—leading east to the foothills and west into Harrisburg, still a small town. A major feature of the town, when I was growing up, was and still is the railroad which cuts through just about a block off the main street, Highway 99.

Back in the 40s and 50s, the establishments I associate with Harrisburg would include the hardware store, Blehms version of a department store, a funeral home just down from the grocery; then there was the implement company, the bank, the meat locker, a second hand store and a pool hall, which seemed a very wicked place to me as a child.

Dr. Clark's office was on one of the side streets, but he made house calls too, which became a point of concern when my sister Mabel was born during a December-January flood and there was question as to whether the doctor could get to our house.

There were also a few churches and a school, but they have no significant presence in my memory, which simply reflects the fact that they were essentially part of the "outsiders'" world which had nothing to do with us.

What did stand out was that intersection at the Mennonite Church. Diamond Hill went east to the foothills and west into town. Powerline Road went north to Highway 99, which wound through more farmland toward Portland, and south to Eugene, a city where we occasionally did shopping. Or Mom and Dad frequently went to a chiropractor, Dr. Scofield (the name I find a curious coincidence—the same name as Dad's beloved Scofield Bible).

So the parameters of a particular geography—the Valley there between the Cascades and the coast range—had not only the effect of suggesting physical boundaries, but also of creating a sense of some-

> *"To have the Church be what you want it to be would require the continuous, miraculous meddling of God in human affairs, whereas it is our dignity that we are allowed more or less to get on with these graces that come through faith . . . and which work through our human nature. God has chosen to operate in this manner. We can't understand this, but we can't reject it . . . ."*
>
> *--Flannery O'Connor, The Habit of Being (1958)*

thing almost indescribable—the greens and blues of the fields and mountains, the interminable rain, the pride of the Pioneer spirit, the stubborn adventurousness of westerners, a dogged commitment to hard work.

How much I had been formed by this sense of place, I would not really understand until I moved to the east coast—and Del and I would wonder, not being able to quite put our finger on it, what is different about Easterners from those we had grown up with in the West.

But it was the Mennonite congregation there at that crossroads that was the center of our life—church and work. Very early memories include the seating arrangement in the sanctuary, with the women on the left side of the church and the men on the right.

Sunday morning and evening services, Wednesday night prayer meetings, yearly revival meetings, Good Friday fasting followed by "council meeting," an intimidating evening service of examination and preparation for communion. Were we right with God?

These patterns of community gatherings were all we knew—ordering both our worship and social life. The starkly plain auditorium, with the big white-faced and black-rimmed clock on the wall, and board benches, underscored the rule of simplicity.

The congregational singing (even a wonderful Singing School for a period of time), the reading of the scripture, the prayers, all these practices were as natural as anything we could imagine.

At prayer time, the congregation would turn around and kneel, facing the bench. This provided fidgety children a place to rest their elbows if the prayers got long.

I can still remember the musky, varnish-ey smell of the seat on a sweaty night when we children rested our faces on the hard bench.

The ministers who shared the pulpit had been chosen by lot, and we called them simply "the preachers." There was John Yoder, the gentle bishop from the Midwest who had married an Oregon woman.

It was John who I loved to listen to when he took his turn preaching. John had a special gift for story, enlivening his presentations in ways that made me sit up and follow the sermon.

The pulpit bench would have included perhaps three or four ministers who took turns preaching. Untrained and unpaid, selected from the congregation, these men carried out their ministerial duties faithfully while earning a livelihood by farming, milking cows or whatever.

After a particular Sunday's preacher had concluded his sermon, each of the others would rise in turn, and offer affirmation along the lines of "I want to say 'yea' and 'amen' to the message."

I often think about that ritual—was it support for one another? A testimony to the orthodoxy of the message, a symbol of unity? A way for all the ministers to participate every Sunday?

The Pacific Northwest Mennonite Historical Society

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The Sacredness of the Word

Recalling John Yoder's sermon stories, I go now to my second theme, the sacredness of the Word. And here, in the life of the Mennonite community, it is Word with a capital W, for the Bible was central to everything the church stood for.

The Bible was at the center of daily life—of everything we did; it was an authoritative guide for ordinary living and a call to a personal commitment to follow Christ.

Terms such as "discipleship" or "peace and justice" may not have been common terms, but "conversion," "repentance," "forgiveness," "nonresistance," "nonconformity" and "separation from the world" were a part of our everyday vocabulary.

John 1 is a scripture passage I remember from very early days—it was a text I memorized: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God." Word was sacred.

The Bible included some of the most magnificent stories ever, as we learned in summer Bible school, or as at home we immersed ourselves in *Egermeier's Bible Story Book*—mind-boggling events and larger than life characters: Noah, Daniel, Gideon, Esther and Haman, Ruth and Obediah, Sisera and Jael, Jehu and Jezebel, Elijah and the priests of Baal.

The Harrisburg Mennonite Church at the intersection of Powerline and Diamond Hill Road. The picture was taken in July 1948.

Egermeier's full page pictures fed our imaginations—these stories were better than Grimm's fairy tales or the Arabian Nights.

And because books in general were honored in our home, I came to see that word was sacred in a different way than the Bible was Holy. After all, God created the world through word.

I still have several books from my growing up which have survived 18 or so moves in Del's and my married life. There's the worn maroon Gideon New Testament (there's a story about that in my book).

Also some faded red Elsie Dinsmore books, from a historic fiction series about the Civil War south. These books were given to my cousins and me by a deaf great aunt whose access to a broader world was through reading.

I have been forever grateful that Aunt Daisy shared her love of books with us—and that her reading choices seemed to raise no questions from my parents.

My father's extensive library reinforced my love of books. Although he did not have a chance to go to high school, he found ways to continue his education.

Dad was a voracious reader. He kept up with fundamentalist publications and had shelves of books which included theology, missiology, dispensational/apocalyptic/prophetic works, and treatises on health.

His Scofield Bible was a ready reference, there on the stand right next to his chair, placed alongside the Sunday school quarterly. He kept up with farm magazines, church periodicals, the *National Geographic*, materials on investments.

A classy set of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, with gold-embossed spines, occupied a prominent place in the study, lined up on the beautifully grained wood bookshelf just made for those massive volumes. This luxury purchase from a traveling salesman must have provided a rather

sharp contrast to the otherwise modest and worn furnishings of the living room, dining room and study—what we called "the den."

After my dad died, I found in a box of mementos he had saved from his youth his grade reports from a winter Bible term at Eastern Mennonite in Virginia.

Here are his class notes from a "Personal Evangelism Class" and a list of the other courses he took: Music, Acts, Old Testament Geography. He saved this little orange Student Handbook, with one section outlining "Dormitory Rules and Reminders" including instructions such as "Students must be in the building after dusk unless permission for absence is granted," or "No recreational games are allowed during any devotional period."

I also found a small hardcover in old fashioned type called the *Seven Laws of Teaching*, which confirmed for me his interest in education and his lifelong pursuit of learning.

Books for me were more than an escape or entertainment growing up. They gave me a way to see beyond the prescriptive boundaries of the community and they to some extent helped me understand myself—though this would not have been an awareness I would have been conscious of.

Our family attended the Harrisburg Mennonite Church until I was eleven, when along with several other families, we moved to Sacramento, California, for the beginning of a new Skid Row Rescue Mission.

I remember my upbringing with great appreciation, recognizing that a foundation of biblical teaching, of values of simplicity and service, and a grounding in the Anabaptist faith tradition have provided trustworthy guides. The secluded nature of the Mennonite community was reinforced by a tight network of family relations, a social life centered in the church, and by the fact that education beyond grade school was limited if not frowned on.

We had a finely developed sense of "insiders" and "outsiders," we being the "insiders." Where the Amish refer to non-Amish as "English," we referred to those outside the church as "outsiders"—Catholic or Protestant neighbors were all "outsiders," as were our beloved elementary teachers who taught us and the other non-Mennonites attending the country two-room school, just down from the church house, a few hundred yards off of Diamond Hill Road.

Simple homemade dresses for the women and girls and plain clothes for the men and boys also set us apart, but we didn't mind that because our support and identity was within the community.

We didn't feel particularly deprived without radios and members took care to be thoughtful about the way they used their money, not choosing flashy cars or other demonstrations of "worldliness." When my parents built a new house there on the farm, I remember one discussion of whether they should have drapes on the two big picture windows in the front. Perhaps that would have been too fashionable? In any case, they decided it was more appropriate to have Venetian blinds.

These childhood memories underscore the community expectations which regulated our lives, and made my mother particularly sensitive (perhaps overly sensitive) about "what people would think."

It was a mode of living which put the Body of the Church ahead of personal preference, and that could be a good thing. I do think that the severe emphasis on sin and worldliness eclipsed at times the love and grace of God.

All faith communities have their human limitations, which reinforces for me the mystery of Christ choosing the church as his body by which the message of the Gospel is conveyed to the world.

It wasn't until I was well into adulthood that I realized I had a somewhat stunted view of the breadth and depth of God's love as expressed in John 3:16—a verse memorized by every child.

I had been unable to grasp that God "loved the world," because ingrained in us was the prohibition against loving anything about the world. Whatever smacked of "the world" was dangerous, if not sinful.

I still have my mother's "Confession of Faith"—the same "Confession of Faith" used at my instruction and baptism. Stuck between the pages are a couple of pamphlets—one titled, "Some benefits of not wearing a necktie, by a Methodist Preacher." There is also this Herald Press tri-fold tract outlining what "We Believe," with a couple of paragraphs on the history of Mennonite beginnings in Europe. J.C. Wenger's *Glimpses of Mennonite History and Doctrine* and another book on Menno Simons were recommended for further reading.

All faith communities have their human limitations, which reinforces for me the mystery of Christ choosing the church as his body by which the message of the Gospel is conveyed to the world.

As Kathleen Norris in *Amazing Grace* observes, "The church is like the Incar-

Building on our Heritage

Progress! *The new Pacific Northwest Mennonite Historical Society Library and Archives building is taking shape. The pictures show the new road from Whiskey Hill (above, left), the library foundation (above, right), and the building frame (left). Look for information soon about ways you can help us complete this project, and for details about the building dedication.*

nation itself, a shaky proposition. It is a human institution, full of ordinary people, sinners like me, who say and do cruel, stupid things. But it is also a divinely inspired institution, full of good purpose, which partakes of a unity far greater than the sum of its parts. That is why it is called the body of Christ" ("A Vocabulary of Faith," 273).

So, my upbringing in the Mennonite church not only gave me an appreciation for Christ's incarnational presence in the world, but it also instilled in me a sense of God's mysterious ways. This is perhaps best illustrated by a story told me by my grandfather, Frank Kropf, who lived just within sight of the church house, there on Powerline Road.

Interviewing my grandfather for one of my classes at the University of Oregon, when I eventually returned to finish my bachelor's degree, I understood more about the strength of Anabaptist beliefs in the life of our congregation and in the pacifist commitments of my grandparents and my parents.

During World War I, the Mennonites here in the valley were harassed in various ways for their nonresistant stand. They were considered German sympathizers by some, because church services were conducted in the German language. There was considerable pressure for the Mennonites to buy war bonds, which they refused to do, greatly irritating the locals.

Tensions mounted, my grandfather Frank recalled, and one morning he looked out his south window at the church house just down the road. He saw that a yellow stripe had been painted around the building.

Upon going down to examine the situation, Frank and his father found the front doors padlocked and a sign above the door: "This church is closed for the duration of the war." As my grandfather described it, "things went from bad to worse," with a bunch of rowdies, on occasion, driving by shooting at their place and at his father Daniel's house just up the road.

One day, as Frank tells the story, some young husky fellows showed up at several places, mob-like. Not finding Frank at home, they warned his wife Annie that they would be back that night and they came back.

All stayed in the car except one big fellow who approached and asked why they didn't fight. Grandpa gave a brief answer and the young man then said, "You'll have to take the consequences." The fellow climbed back into the car and they zoomed out of there, leaving Frank and his family with some anxiety as they prepared for bed.

It was years later, my grandfather told me, that one of the guys involved that night confessed what had happened the day they had intended to harm these pacifists.

At each of three places, they had been prepared to tar and feather these Mennonites, but, the fellow said, "when they [got there] there was a heavenly being that stood between them and us and they couldn't get a hold of anybody."

That account has continued to be significant for me and our children and grandchildren, one example of how story, how words, more broadly would prove to be a shaping force in my life.

Why would you want to do this?

Now just a few words yet about work and the exploration of calling. This was unexpectedly focused for me by the question: "Why would you want to do this?"

This was blurted out by a woman Del and I had chanced to meet while waiting to be introduced to the Bluffton College Board of Trustees at the campus interview. It was a good question. I did not have a good answer.

On the title page of some editions of the *Martyr's Mirror* is an emblem of a workman digging, with the words, Arbeit und Hoffe—"work and hope."This would be a good description of our Mennonite life—fierce faith and godly work were intertwined.

There was no question that each person was called to a life consecrated to God, a renunciation of sin and an acceptance of salvation. There was also a clear teaching that a woman's place was one of silence in church; and, in everyday living, women's roles were narrowly prescribed.

I did not grow up with any sense of rebelling against these teachings—at least not consciously. The trouble was, what was I to do with the nudges—the keen desire for education, the example of my own parents who took seriously God's call to service.

How does a woman listen to and hear the church and how does one honor a personal call? The values of community, of discerning the work of the Spirit, of embracing God's plan and purpose did raise questions for me—some of them difficult. And they raised issues for my parents as well.

I often go back to farmer/philosopher Wendell Berry who writes so wonderfully about work: "Who seeing the work that is to be done can help wanting to do it?"

When I told my Dad that I wanted to attend college—this was just after I had become engaged—his question to me was, "You're getting married, why would you want to go to college?" Or later, my mother's question when I was asked to become the academic dean at Eastern Mennonite College, "Will you have a good man to work for?"

And I could reassure her. Yes, I would have a good man to work for. The clear hierarchy of God, Man and Woman (with the angels in there somewhere), was an uncomplicated and orderly pattern in my upbringing and it was not something I took lightly.

But I discovered that my Mother could also appreciate the humor at times when a role expectation was turned on its head. I was asked to give the commencement address at Western Mennonite School one spring; this was quite some time after we had moved to Virginia.

My Dad and Mom had actually surprised me by coming to the graduation, since I had not told them I was speaking. Mom reported afterward that a woman had asked her why my husband had not been asked to give the address.

Mom was nonplussed and didn't know what to say. The fact that my mother even told me about this conversation was remarkable because in a clear, hierarchical church system, it was a befuddling question.

Let me say, in conclusion, just a few words about the importance of spouse, family and the church in discerning one's call. I had gained from my parents a sense of the importance of taking God's call seriously, of being willing to take risks. That old familiar hymn, "Teach me thy Truth, O Mighty One," may be as good a description of my own journey as any.

The songwriter lays it out:

Prepare my life to fill its place in service, Lord, for thee

Accept my talents, great or small, choose thou the path for me

. . . .Grant me the grace for every task . . . .in service, Lord, for thee.

This text by a Mennonite woman and the music composed by a Mennonite man in 1938 was a hymn that would have been sung often in the congregation there at Harrisburg.

After Del and I and our two young daughters returned in the late 60s from a three-year mission assignment teaching in Nigeria, the question was what next. Del returned to teaching for a year in Portland and then we resettled in Eugene.

There Del enrolled in additional graduate study. With our daughters now in elementary school, Del urged me to go back and finish college, building on the one year of study I had had at Eastern Mennonite before we were married.

When the invitation came for Del to accept a faculty position in math at EMC, this meant

another move. Settling in Virginia meant new opportunities, including graduate education for me.

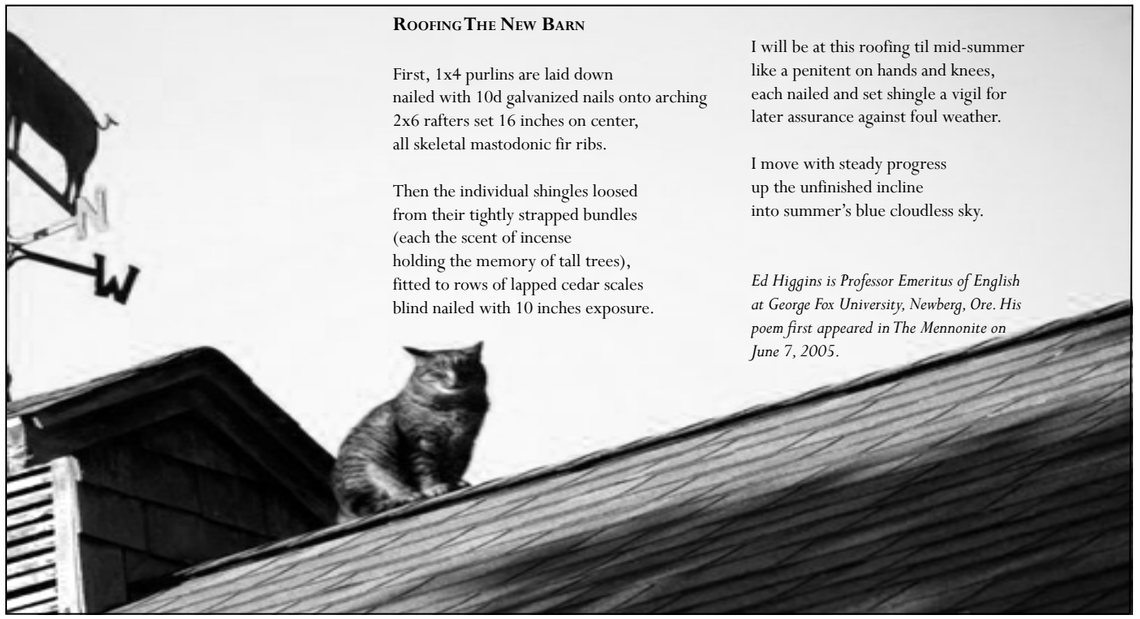
At each point when I would be asked to consider a position, whether it was for the church or one of the Mennonite institutions, it was Del's strong encouragement that allowed me to consider possibilities I would never have imagined.

Our two daughters were usually a part of the decision making process also. After a time of seeking counsel as to a particular call, whether I said yes or no (and I sometimes said no), I became increasingly aware that it was not totally up to me to determine what God might have in mind.

I often go back to farmer/philosopher Wendell Berry who writes so wonderfully about work: "Who seeing the work that is to be done can help wanting to do it?" Psalm 139 was also a guide for me in the difficult questions about accepting the Bluffton College presidency—the reassurance that even before we are born, God knows what's ahead—that God ordains and designs our lives.

I have come to see, in retrospect, that the teachings of the church, the example of my parents and the discerning counsel of persons we have gone to at particular decision points have shaped my own understanding of what it means to hear God's call. I say a little bit in the book about several "literal calls"—telephone calls coming at the most unexpected times, while doing laundry or shampooing the carpet, for example—all part of the everyday mystery of God intruding, sometimes downright interrupting our lives. It is the unexpected, the surprise, which still gives me pause. This often requires making peace with uncertainty, trusting that God knows what it's all about.

Lee Snyder was the eighth president of Bluffton University and its first female leader. Now retired, Lee continues to serve in educational organizations, boards of trustees, and the church. She and her husband, Del, have two children and four grandchildren, and divide their time between Virginia and Oregon.



Roofing The New Barn

First, 1x4 purlins are laid down
nailed with 10d galvanized nails onto arching
2x6 rafters set 16 inches on center,
all skeletal mastodonic fir ribs.

Then the individual shingles loosed
from their tightly strapped bundles
(each the scent of incense
holding the memory of tall trees),
fitted to rows of lapped cedar scales
blind nailed with 10 inches exposure.

I will be at this roofing til mid-summer
like a penitent on hands and knees,
each nailed and set shingle a vigil for
later assurance against foul weather.

I move with steady progress
up the unfinished incline
into summer's blue cloudless sky.

Ed Higgins is Professor Emeritus of English at George Fox University, Newberg, Ore. His poem first appeared in The Mennonite on June 7, 2005.

Other Mennonite Women's Personal Histories

Lee Snyder's memoir, *At Powrline and Diamond Hill* (Cascadia 2010), provides a compelling glimpse into what it meant to be Mennonite, and female, in the mid-twentieth century. Her life story of growing up in a conservative Mennonite community, the daughter of two loving parents who valued their faith above all, shows the many ways the individual can convey the universal; it is easy to imagine Snyder's experiences similarly replicated in Mennonite homes across the Willamette Valley. That's the power of a memoir: one person's history gives insight into the history of many, allowing us to see more clearly what life was like for young Mennonite women living in the wide open spaces of western Oregon.

Snyder's memoir joins a relatively small—but growing—body of memoirs by Anabaptist women published in the last decade. Here's a list of several others that narrate a personal story while also providing clues about the Mennonites' larger story:

Katie Funk Wiebe, You Never Gave Me a Name (Cascadia, 2010).

Wiebe, considered by some the matriarch of Mennonite literature, is a well-regarded writer and speaker in the Mennonite Brethren tradition. Her memoir traces her private tragedies (her husband died young, leaving her with a large family to raise), as well as her struggle to find her voice in a church tradition where women were to remain silent.

Rhoda Janzen, Mennonite in a Little Black Dress (Holt, 2009).

Janzen's 2010 memoir received acclaim on the New York Times bestsellers list, introducing thousands of readers to Mennonite faith and culture. Her story of despair and loss, as well as the healing she found in her Mennonite home, has been lauded by some Mennonites and derided by others, who feel her critique of Mennonites is unfair hyperbole.

Mary-Ann Kirkby, I am Hutterite (Thomas Nelson, 2010).

Ostensibly about her Hutterite childhood, Kirkby's memoir is also about so much more: about community and isolation, about hardship and joy, about the importance of claiming one's heritage—both its positive and negative aspects.

Connie Braun, The Steppes are the Colour of Sepia (Ronsdale, 2008).

Braun's memoir explores the story of her father and grandfather, who faced horrible oppression as Mennonites in the Ukraine. Her story continues in British Colombia, where her father has landed as an immigrant, and describes the displacement and isolation her family feels as strangers in a strange land.

Cynthia Yoder. Crazy Quilt: Pieces of a Mennonite Life (Cascadia, 2003).

Yoder traces a life journey not unfamiliar to those struggling with mental illness, with loss, with a search for identity. The title of Yoder's strikingly candid memoir, her first book, becomes a fascinating multi-layered metaphor for her narrative of depression, disaffection, and ultimately reconciliation: to her self, her husband, and the Mennonite community that claimed her as their own.

Book Review

Snyder's Memoir and the Meaning of Home

by Shirley Showalter

Do you remember the scene in the movie *As Good as It Gets* when Jack Nicholson tells Helen Hunt, "You make me want to be a better person"? This book made me feel like that. Lee Snyder, whose life of academic and church leadership, culminating in the presidency of Bluffton University, 1996-2006, far exceeded what she ever asked or imagined in her youth, has written an inspiring spiritual memoir.

One of the things I like most about this book is that it owes its origins, in part, at least, to a course taught by Jeff Gundy at Bluffton University when Lee Snyder was president. The topics in the class included the finding of vocation.

Spiritual memoirs have their own tradition, and, according to some, it is a gendered tradition. Those who have studied the history of the form usually begin with Augustine's *Confessions* and also recognize the important contributions of cloistered, powerful, medieval women, such as Hildegard of Bingen, Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avila, and Marjorie Kempe.

Jill Ker Conway has observed, "There are archetypal life scripts for man and for women which show remarkable persistence over time. For men, the overarching pattern for life comes from adaptations of the story of the epic hero in classical antiquity. Life is an odyssey, a journey through many trials and tests, which the hero must surmount alone through courage, endurance, cunning and moral strength."

Conway notes that St. Augustine, in *Confessions*, assumes strong authorial agency through hundreds of pages and then, even when he surrenders to God. The first women memoirists were, like Augustine, religious figures. But unlike him, they told their stories not as heroes but as meditators on the nature of God and as ones who experienced direct revelation of divine illumination.

They did not focus on the will or the intellect, and thus were not heroic action figures but receivers of revelation. Conway traces this archetypal pattern of female surrender and service, which may include ecstatic visions but does not include what she calls "agency."

Women frequently do not think of themselves as actors on the world stage but as players called by God to partake in the divine and to give witness to it. Conway goes on to trace the evolution of this archetype from spiritual to secular in the 18th and 19th centuries, when finding the ideal mate and acquiring domestic security replace the surrender to God in women's narratives.

Why this historical analysis as background for reviewing the memoir of a Mennonite woman college president? It's a bit of a side question, but I wonder whether Mennonites, with their emphasis on community, peace, and servant-leadership follow this gender division in their autobiographical writing or whether both men and women adopt more of Julian's position toward God rather than Augustine's.

In any case, Oregon figures prominently in this book, and Snyder opens with an introduction that lays out her purpose beautifully, placing herself squarely in the women's spiritual autobiography tradition of accidental leader following a spiritual path. "Growing up in a Mennonite family," she says, "I did not know women who had career goals. I never had any."

Sometimes statements like that sound disengenuous coming from leaders who have a need to deny their power, and Gundy, who writes the foreword, challenges a similar one where Snyder says, "While I never actually rebelled against the community's strict expectations, rituals, and beliefs, I gradually began to see that the sharp lines of separation and supposedly clear boundaries were much murkier than anyone wanted to admit."

He is right to question her, even with tongue in cheek, because Snyder's career trajectory is amazing–from farm girl with only a year of college to young wife and mother, years of voluntary service in Nigeria, administrative assistant at Eastern Mennonite University, assistant dean, academic dean, president of Bluffton University, and denominational head for several years during a decade of presidential leadership.

Along the way, while working and mothering, she somehow finished three degrees, concluding with a Ph.D. in English literature from the University of Oregon with a dissertation centered on Joan Didion. "Why do you want to go to college?" asked her father before she set off across the country with her high school sweetheart for one year of college before they married.

"Will you have a good man to work for?" came from her mother when she took the position of academic dean at Eastern Mennonite University, and "Why would you want to do this?" asked a board member's wife when she interviewed at Bluffton. All three questions indicate how radical her path was when judged by traditional Mennonite standards for women.

How did she resolve them? By her thorough knowledge of the Bible and its narratives of unusual people called by God to do particular work in the world, by her careful reading of great writers, by her loving relationship with Del, her supportive husband, and by her daily practices of contemplation, some of which included traditional tasks like folding laundry. When she gets a particularly nasty letter in her work as academic dean, she goes home and scrubs the toilets!

What I find most amazing about this book is exactly what I find most wonderful about Lee Snyder in real life. Just barely five feet tall, soft-spoken, and self-effacing, she never commands with her presence. I think about a poetic line describing Emily Dickinson– "demure as dynamite"– when I look at her. Like the frangipani blooms that perfumed her days in Africa, she permeates a place with a spirit of love and power combined.

This memoir comes out of a place of genuine humility. Desiring to serve, she was called to lead. Snyder's story could be told as a tale of rebellion, will, heroic struggle against the odds, and even sexual abuse (she briefly describes an incident with a construction worker when she was seven years old).

In our feminist age we might want to see more criticism of all the people and structures that held her back. That would be the tale of "agency" that Conway seems to desire for women. But this story is not about the individual hero. It celebrates God's surprising mercies, forgiveness (even to the man who molested her), learning, and above all, the community of faith that formed her in that special place in the Willamette Valley of Oregon.

"Is life's purpose something you create or discover?" asks an unnamed professor in this book, probably Snyder herself. Lee Snyder would never claim to have created her life, but she has not been the passive recipient of it, either.

Somewhere between the Oregon sawdust trail of her youth and the president's corner office, she discovered harmony, a peace that passes understanding, something larger than the mere resolution of the contradictions and conflicts in her life.

Her story is not a testimony to striving, or "agency"; instead, it testifies to the possibility that the still small voice inside, when rooted in faith, love, and a physical home in the world, can lead both to great adventures and to a larger spiritual home that we carry with us always.

Shirley Showalter was president of Goshen College from 1997-2004. Her blog, 100memoirs.com, reviews contemporary memoirs from Showalter's unique perspective as a Mennonite farmer's daughter turned college president. She lives in Harrisonburg, Va.

From the Editor

Don't Know Much About History

Here's something I've never felt comfortable sharing about myself: I cheated my way through high school history classes. At the time, it seemed the easiest thing to do; there were more important demands on my attention, like sports and hanging out with friends. And my older brother, a genius in just about every way, had saved all his quizzes, tests, and papers from his own time in American history.

For a few years, I avoided reading history textbooks by simply copying—or, if I had to work a little harder, studying—my brother's old material. I ended up averaging a B in high school history, which was good enough for me.

Now, some twenty-five years later, I often wish I had paid much better attention. When my sons ask me fundamental questions about American history, I have to admit I don't know—and then read like mad to figure out the answers. On a recent trip, visiting our nation's capital, I longed for the context to understand why some of the monuments are important. I also promised myself to read more history books, an imperfect way to make up for what I missed several decades ago.

Turns out, knowing our history, in all its facets is important, although recent surveys show a majority of Americans know little about their nation's past, and even less about world history. It's as if we all had older siblings, doing the hard work of learning history so we didn't have to.

Of course, understanding history provides crucial clues to who we are as country, and international history offers us context to our own national history, allowing us to see how our country was shaped by the forces working with or against us. For some reason, though, most of us seem to have more important things to do: like watching the latest episode of *American Idol*.

Knowing our denominational history is important, too. Knowing the complex, sometimes bloody, and always fascinating history of Anabaptism and of the Mennonites allows believers to appreciate even more the richness of their faith, providing insight into why Mennonites believe what they do.

Knowing history also gives us a clearer understanding of what steadfast belief in principles like pacifism, adult baptism, even a two kingdoms theology has cost Mennonites; a greater appreciation for those who have suffered for their faith; and gratitude that, in our own time and place, we've been given a freedom to worship not afforded many of those who've come before us.

Contemporary culture compels us to look forward: to the next email, the next Facebook post, the next Big Thing on television. As people of faith, though, we also need to make space for looking back, to our past, to the stories of women and men whose own lives bear witness to God's work in them. Preserving and celebrating our Mennonite past is one way we can make these stories accessible to future generations, many who—like me—don't know enough about history.

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We need your help!

The Pacfic Northwest Mennonite Historical Society Newsletter needs a new title. Have one in mind? Let us know at mmock@georgefox.edu or by commenting on our Facebook page. The creator of the winning title will receive a one year membership to the PNMHS.

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