

# timbrel

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WOMEN IN CONVERSATION TOGETHER WITH GOD



## *Healing Stories: Bridges to the Cross*

### **Inside:**

- **Transforming Stories: A Bridge to Healing 4-6**
- **Jesus, My Example for Self-Care 7-9**
- **Bible Study: Rekindle the Gift 10-11**

THE PUBLICATION OF MENNONITE WOMEN USA

## Healing Stories: Bridges to the Cross



Patricia Burdette

Cover: Two women share deeply as they build bridges to healing with their transforming stories. See story page 4.

Courtesy photo

All scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

Each of our lives is a collection of stories. Some are joyous and some are painful, but each story contributes to who we are in the present moment. Some stories we readily share, but others we may never share because they are too painful. Yet, telling our stories is one way we can begin the healing process. Not only can telling our stories be healing for us, the telling also touches others and can provide insights for others in their own lives.


When people tell me what they like about *timbrel*, they often say they enjoy reading other women's stories. Women, in general, tend to be more willing to share their stories of pain with others than men seem to be. This is apparent in this issue of *timbrel*. While many of the stories are painful, they are also hopeful as they point us to the healing grace of Jesus. Truly, nothing can separate us from the love of God.

In my own life, I find it is easier to tell my stories as I grow older. Perhaps it is because I have had time to reflect on the stories and understand how they have helped me grow and become more like Christ. But it is important for young women to know about the power of telling healing stories which empower rather than victimize, which heal rather than hurt. It is also important for young women to learn to identify their own stories and to learn to be able to understand their significance in relationship with ourselves, with others, and with God.

In this issue of *timbrel* Carolyn Holderread Heggen writes about the importance of storytelling and how the information we emphasize impacts ourselves and others. She writes about how we need to tell healing stories rather than toxic stories. Natalie Francisco writes about the importance of self-care and how Jesus is her model for her own self-care activities. Terri J. Plank Brenneman writes in this Bible study lesson how she struggled with her story of battling infertility.

After you read this issue of *timbrel*, I encourage you to think about your own healing stories, and if you decide to write one or two of them down, consider sending them to me for possible inclusion in a future issue of *timbrel*. For it is often not until we tell our stories in writing or through speech that we first really hear them ourselves. And as we begin to understand and share them, we are helping others as well.

### Sister Question for September–October

In preparation for the next issue of *timbrel*, which will focus on Young Women and the Church, consider: **How has your faith been transferred from one generation to the next?** Send your response to <PattyB@MennoniteWomenUSA.org>. 

*timbrel* is the official publication of Mennonite Women USA, a ministry of Mennonite Church USA. *timbrel* provides a place for women to share diverse perspectives and stories and express our prophetic voice as we seek to follow Christ.

The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent the official position of Mennonite Women USA or the board for Mennonite Women USA.

## contents

<b>Transforming Stories: A Bridge to Healing</b> by Carolyn Holderread Heggen	4
<b>Jesus, My Example for Self-Care</b> by Natalie Francisco	7
<b>Bible Study</b> by Terri J. Plank Brenneman	10
<b>Three Windows, Three Women</b>	12
<b>Grapevine</b>	15
<b>Across the Border, Across the Ocean</b> by Marcella Hershberger	16
<b>News &amp; Views</b> by Linda Gehman Peachey	18
<b>Stirrings</b> by Heidi Martin	20

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# Transforming stories: A bridge to healing

by Carolyn Holderread Heggen

No one reaches adulthood without suffering the effects of sin on our world, our relationships, our body, and our self-concept. We all are wounded and in need of healing. This is the bad news. The good news is that our life does not need to be defined by our wounds, by our past. Healing is possible!

Healing happens in various ways in the Bible and in our personal journeys. One bridge to healing is through the transformation of our core life-defining stories and the meaning we give them. Sometimes we do not even consciously recognize the most influential stories in our lives.

“Lisa” was raised in a series of foster homes after having been born to an unmarried teenager. From grade school through graduate school she was a high-achieving student and a driven musician who spent long hours practicing the piano. Everything she undertook she approached with the goal of perfection. In college she stuck to a strict schedule that included time for personal devotions,

*One bridge to healing is through the transformation of our core life-defining stories and the meaning we give them.*

physical exercise, studying and volunteer work. Although she didn't have many friends, she was rewarded with good grades, the praise of her teachers, and academic and citizenship prizes.

After graduation she married a classmate but the marriage soon ended in divorce. She became so depressed that she had to give up her job as a music teacher and withdrew from church and social events.

I learned to know Lisa a few months after her divorce. Before long I sensed that Lisa, early in life, had come to believe she had been unwanted and unwelcomed into this world. Not only had she been given up by her birth mother but felt she had been rejected by subsequent foster parents and then, her husband. The

theme of her internal story seemed to be “I am not good enough to be loved. That’s why people keep abandoning me. If I can achieve perfection, perhaps God and others will love me.”

When I shared with Lisa my hunch of her internal storyline, she started crying in sad agreement. By reflecting on some questions, Lisa was able to start challenging the “truth” of her core story. “Are the people you love perfect or do you love them in spite of imperfections?” “Are there any hints that God has been pursuing and unconditionally loving you throughout your life?” “Are there people who have not abandoned you?” “Are there people who have been a consistent, loving reflection of God’s love for you?” “How might you use the pain in your life to help others?”

As Lisa began trusting that she didn’t need to be perfect to be loved, she found that she was better able to feel the love of God and others. Some years later she remarried. She and her husband opened their home to adolescents in need of foster care and eventually adopted two sisters. Her own childhood wounds have become sources of energy and motivation as she gives her daughters the kind of unconditional love she missed.

When we take our life journey seriously, it can provide healing insight. Do we cling to life-defining stories that hold us in bondage, that disempower us, and rob us of joyful, abundant living? Useful questions to ask are: “What is my dominant story?” “Does this story help me or does it keep me stuck and rob me of joy?”

When we have found transformation for our own wounds, we can extend the gift of healing to others through compassionate, loving listening. A key component of listening that heals is recog-



*Will this child grow up knowing only stories of the tsunami’s destruction or will she also hear stories of her community’s courage, compassion and resilience?*

*Courtesy photo*

nizing the difference between stories that are toxic and those that are healing. Toxic life stories are those that keep people trapped in trauma and emotional pain, in helplessness and hopelessness.

Each time these are retold they become more embedded and influential. It is not helpful to let others repeat again and again stories of trauma and pain in ways that deepen their sense of powerlessness and despair.

Healing stories, on the other hand, help

put painful experiences in perspective. They help the teller identify and be grateful for the internal and external resources that helped her through hard times in the past and give her hope and tools for present and future challenges.

In Sister Care seminars participants learn ways of helping shift toxic stories to healing stories by asking individuals and traumatized groups questions such as:

- Where did you see signs of God's presence as you went through this experience?
- Where did you see signs of human compassion, courage and generosity in the midst of the trauma?
- What were the inner resources you or your community drew upon to get through that period?
- What have you learned through this experience?
- How can you use what you've learned to help others?

When others share their stories of pain and loss with us, may God give us the wisdom and compassion to listen and respond in ways that will help transform them from sources of vulnerability and hopelessness into resources for healing, empowerment and abundant living. 🙏



*Carolyn Holderread Heggen with grieving women in a war-torn village of Nepal.*

*Courtesy photo*

# Jesus, my example for self-care

by *Natalie Francisco*

We are tripartite beings consisting of mind, body and spirit. Each component is equally important and must be cultivated if we are to be healthy and whole. As Christians, we often cater to our spiritual nature by attending church, reading the Bible and other Christian resources, and praying. We try to focus on loving our families and neighbors, particularly as women who are nurturers by nature. However, we sometimes fail to nurture ourselves in the midst of caring for the needs of others vying for our attention. As a result, our own health may be jeopardized.

Taking the time to nurture our own needs is vitally important. I call it self-care because it is an intentional focus of the mind, heart, and will to tend to ourselves, the most valuable asset that God has given us (other than his son Jesus Christ).

To be quite honest, it occurred to me shortly after my 40th birthday several years ago that I had devoted my time and energy to the lives of my family and to the church to make sure that their needs and interests were tended to at the expense of neglecting my own. I really didn't realize how much time I invested in my children until they left for college and, all of a sudden, I experienced a void, and my husband and I were confronted with a time of awkward transition as empty nesters.

I don't regret literally pouring myself into my family or our ministry, but I do realize that there are things that I would have done differently to develop personal interests outside of my responsibilities as a wife, mother and the many roles I've had in full-time ministry. It dawned on me that I had allowed myself to be swallowed up in the shadows of putting everyone else first, and my health suffered as a result. I had two procedures done—an endometrial ablation and a partial hysterectomy because I had developed fibroids and had a tumor removed which was between the size of a very large

*Natalie Francisco with her husband, Leslie, and daughters, (l to r) Lesley, Nicole, and Lauren.*

*Courtesy photo*



grapefruit and a soccer ball. When my children left for college and to pursue a life on their own, I discovered that I needed to find an outlet that would nurture my intellectual, physical and social needs that had been lacking. Although I had concentrated on feeding my spirit, the other components that were just as important desperately needed attention.

In Luke 2:52, Jesus is the prime example of foursquare

development. The scripture validates that he continued to grow in wisdom, stature, and in favor with God and people. Other scriptures support the fact that he took the time to rest, eat and exercise as he traveled from town to town. He also fasted, prayed, and was ministered to by the Holy Spirit as needed to tend to his spiritual development. He was found in the synagogue as a young child and later, min-



*Natalie Francisco and her daughter, Nicole Francisco, with Cornell West, Princeton University professor, philosopher, and author.*

*Courtesy photo*

istering to multitudes wherever he went. His inquisitive nature and masterful teaching underscore his intellectual stimulation and growth. To reinforce the need for human contact and social growth, Jesus chose a more intimate, inner circle among his twelve disciples. Peter, James, and John were asked to join him in prayer and on specific occasions when he wanted to reveal more of himself to those who knew him better than anyone else. (We, too, need to have an inner circle of trusted friends with whom we can be ourselves without position, platform or pretense.)

My epiphany at age 40 and Jesus' example in Luke 2:52, prompt me daily to be a better steward of my inner and outer health. Self-care includes not only the nurturing of my spiritual growth, but also focusing on my intellectual growth by reading resources that cause me to think critically; visiting museums to learn new information; and traveling to places where I've never

been in order to become acculturated and accepting of others' perspectives and ways of doing things. I strive to develop my social life by being intentional about maintaining current friendships

*It dawned on me that I had allowed myself to be swallowed up in the shadows of putting everyone else first, and my health suffered as a result.*

and developing new associations with those who can sharpen and stretch me to be better than I am in order to grow and excel, but also so that I won't take myself too seriously. In an effort to grow in my physical development, I am determined to exercise at least four times a week, and to make wiser choices regarding my food choices and calorie intake. (As a result, I have lost 60 pounds in the last year.)

The road to health and wholeness requires intentional, ongoing effort involving careful thought, a strategy, and the willpower to follow through in placing ourselves on our own "to-do" list daily without feeling guilty for doing so. If Jesus could care for himself, you and I certainly need to as well! 📖

## Resources

### Books

Baldwin, Christina. *Storycatcher*. Novato, CA: New World Library, 2005.

Baldwin, Christina. *Life's Companion: Journal Writing as a Spiritual Quest*. New York: Bantam Books, 1991.

Cepero, Helen. *Journaling as a Spiritual Practice: Encountering God Through Attentive Writing*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity P, 2008.

Francisco, Natalie A. *A Woman's Journal for Joyful Living*. Dallas, TX: St. Paul P, 2011.

### Web

Robson, John and Patrice. *Creative Journaling for Clarity, Creativity and Connection*. Journaling Tools, Systems, Ideas, and Prompts. 2011. Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. < <http://www.journalingtools.com/>>.

## Rekindle the gift

by Terri J. Plank Brenneman

### 1 Timothy 4:14–15; 2 Timothy 1:4–7, 14

Paul writes letters of encouragement to Timothy, a young leader in the ministry of Christ. “Hold firm; remain steady; carry on the ministry tasks in the face of obstacles” dominates the message. Paul reminds Timothy that he has been recognized by God, by Paul, and by the community of faith as holding a gift from God. As a good mentor, Paul bolsters Timothy’s flagging zeal of youth as conflicts and struggles arise. Timothy’s gift is not to be set aside, but rather carried on in “a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.” The exercise of the gift brings life, healing, and salvation to those who are touched by Timothy. The gift is not for Timothy alone, but is to be shared.

I was at an all-time low in my struggle with infertility, feeling battered, bruised, abandoned, and hopeless. Without achieving this goal of procreation, where was the meaning and purpose in my life? I asked. What was the reason for my being? While meditating I stumbled upon this Scripture—“rekindle the gift”—and felt compelled to understand the deeper meaning behind the infertility. What gift in me could be rekindled? I knew I had to address the growing distance I felt from God. Anger and tears poured forth as I expressed my disappointment, loss, and feeling that I really did not matter to God, or anyone.

As I cried and ranted, a vision came to me of being held close, my hair stroked, and the soothing words, “Let it all out,” spoken. God prefers my raving anger and lashing out to my more usual pattern of turning away and shutting down or throwing myself into everyday tasks. In that moment, I knew God had been with me every step of the way, even when I did not sense God’s presence.

Then came the clincher. Gently, God reminded me of all the good things in my life, for which I am grateful, and that I matter to God, whether I feel it or not. Deeper yet, God has gifted me with abilities no one else has: gifts of healing, loving, and caring that are uniquely mine to share. These gifts are bestowed on me by divine power and what I do with them is of utmost importance. I walked away from this encounter with renewed awareness that my role as a therapist is truly God’s calling and gift of grace to others. Living out that calling as a midwife of the soul, I



*This Bible study is an excerpt from the Bible study guide by Terri J. Plank Brenneman, **Wonderfully Made: Women, Faith, and Self-Care**, which is available from the Mennonite Women USA office and from Mennonite Publishing Network.*

*Wonderfully Made was developed by Mennonite Women USA and Mennonite Women Canada.*

help others live life abundantly out of their God-given giftedness. My own life is fulfilled.

God has graced each of us with a gift that is uniquely ours to share with the world. Each of us was “knit together” (Psalm 139:13) in the womb, designed and created as unique, special, and valuable. Some of us have many talents and abilities. Some of us have one or two things we know we do well. Recognizing our Godgift connects us to the mission, the ministry, to which God calls us.

Often we think of mission or ministry as belonging solely to persons who are ordained to serve God and the church. Yet, God calls us to give out of what we have and who we are. Having

## PONDER

1. *List ten things that are strengths or gifts you possess. What do others admire in you? What is something you might do if you were ten times bolder?*

2. *Has there been a time in your life when you felt far from God, when the demands of life or the task at hand seemed far greater than your ability? How did encouragement or support to persevere come to you?*

received God’s gift, the work of our lives is to grow, attend to, and develop the gift—to live it out in the full expression of our lives. While the gift involves a talent, ability, or capacity that we possess, in reality the gift is us. The gift is YOU—your personhood in its totality. We find many reasons to shy away from the prospect of being God’s gift to the world, for who are we to presume our lives in this world matter? Yet, this is precisely what Paul points to for Timothy. In 1 Timothy he states, “Don’t neglect the gift,” which is important for Timothy’s own salvation as well as for those who hear his words. Whether we preach, teach, or mother, or cook, or clean, we do all for the glory of God. In the generous outpouring of our gifts, the world is healed and so are we. 📖

**Pray:** *May we not neglect the gift that is in us; may we rekindle this gift of God. May we be freed from any spirit of cowardice, so we may live fully in your spirit of power, love, and self-discipline, O God. Amen.*

# Three Windows Three Women

## Stories of healing

*Kelly Sauder Neff, 32  
Goshen, Indiana*



Almost two and half years ago my husband, Jim, and I were anxiously awaiting our firstborn son. After a year and a half of struggling with infertility, we were finally going to have the little baby we so desperately wanted. On December 31, 2008, Connor James was born, but the delivery did not go as expected. During labor, Connor lost oxygen for eleven minutes. This forever changed our lives. Connor was resuscitated but shortly after he began seizing, indicating brain damage. Connor lived for seven days in the NICU and tried so hard to stay with us, but the damage was too severe; we had to let him go. The child I was so excited to watch grow and change was now gone and my heart was shattered.

I have never felt such brokenness. In the beginning of this long journey of grief, I felt abandoned by God. So many people were praying for us and for Connor, and yet, he died. How could God let such a beautiful, strong little boy leave this earth? While struggling with this question and walking through my grief journey I learned God did not leave me. Rather, God is right beside me, crying with me because I no longer have my son with me. This image has carried me through these long days.

If I could have Connor back, I would take him in a second. He is my son and he made me a Mother. I have grown so much these past few years in ways that I never could have imagined. I am blessed to have family and friends who have walked beside me in my mourning by allowing me space to feel what I need to feel in the moment. There have been moments when I have felt Connor's love embrace me, reminding me that he is always with me. I believe that the hole in my heart is the piece of me that went with Connor when he passed away so that he knows I am always with him. I believe that heaven and earth are intertwined

in such a way that only God could have made it happen. I believe that there is a beautiful mystery surrounding creation and somewhere in that mystery God has shown me love and encouragement through Connor, family and friends. 📍

*Barbra Gant, 60  
Marysville, Ohio*

“We have your husband, and I’m sorry to say that he has passed away.” I had just turned 43, and now, with this phone call, I was a widow. My husband’s struggle with drugs he used to numb the pain of back injury and childhood trauma had ended with the police finding his body in our car on a Chicago street.

Evanston Mennonite Church, with about 30 members, was my church family and I called Karen, our congregational chairperson, immediately. A church sister, Diana, came to support me that day. She helped by calling the funeral home. She took the underwear from the drying rack in the living room, folded it, and put it away. Since our car had been impounded, she loaned me her car until my family could arrive the next day. Diana was the godsend I needed on my first day of widowhood.

My church family remembered my husband with the only viewing and funeral held in the apartment building basement where we worshiped at that time. Diana played the piano for the funeral and made a tape of the service. My church sisters served a meal to an unusual assortment of funeral attendees. They supported me through those early days.

As the only widow in my young congregation, I felt lost. After years of daily kisses and hugs, I now could go weeks without anyone touching me. But I asked for hugs and my church family began giving me hugs. My body ached with grief, so three women got together with me weekly to exchange back rubs, which we did for more than a year. In time, with the grace of God and the healing love and touch of my church sisters, I was healed into a new “normal” in my life. 📍



*Editor's note: This column is a forum for women to share perspectives on the current timbrel theme. It introduces women spanning their 20's–30's, 40's–50's, and 60's and above. If you are interested in writing for this column, please contact editor, Patricia Burdette, at <PattyB@MennoniteWomenUSA.org>.*



*Pamela Roth, 62  
Gulfport, Mississippi*

***MW USA Mission  
and Vision:***

*Our mission at  
Mennonite Women  
USA is to em-  
power women and  
women's groups as  
we nurture our life  
in Christ through  
studying the Bible,  
using our gifts, hear-  
ing each other, and  
engaging in mission  
and service.*

*Mennonite Women  
USA invites women  
across generations,  
cultures, and places  
to share and honor  
our stories, care  
for each other, and  
express our pro-  
phetic voice boldly  
as we seek to follow  
Christ.*

As Charles Dickens said in his book, *A Tale of Two Cities*, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness...it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair...." As a Christian, I can relate to Dickens. We are truly living in a time when the world needs someone who cares; someone to turn to when people feel hopeless.

In John 12:32 (*The Message*) we read, "At this moment, the world is in a crisis....And I, as I am lifted up from the earth, will attract everyone to me and gather them around me." For me, this verse brings a sense of relief and a direct challenge. I am relieved to know that the weight of the world is not on my shoulders; yet, I am deeply challenged and committed to live for Christ and to point others to Him.

The first two lines in the chorus of Chris Tomlin's song, "The Wonderful Cross," bring definition to the challenge to live for Christ:

*Oh the wonderful Cross, Oh the wonderful Cross  
Bids me come and die and find that I might truly live*

It is through the cross that my friends and neighbors, my brothers and sisters in Christ will fully experience the fullness of a loving, caring God. How is that wonderful Cross bidding you to build a bridge to show someone you care? 🙏

# Grapevine


## Brenneman's Bible study guide complements Sister Care seminars

**The 2011 Bible Study Guide**, *Wonderfully Made: Women, Faith, and Self Care*, by Terri J. Plank Brenneman is now available. "To offer good and healthy care to others, we need to nurture and replenish ourselves, our primary resource," writes Brenneman. This study validates the importance of personal wholeness in a way that complements Mennonite Women USA's Sister Care seminars. (See pages 10–11 in this issue to read an excerpt from this study guide.) *Wonderfully Made* was commissioned and developed by Mennonite Women USA and Mennonite Women Canada. To order your study guide contact the Mennonite Women USA office at 866-866-2872 or Mennonite Publishing Network at 800-245-7894 (US) or 800-631-6535 (Canada).

**Sister Care seminars**, presented by Carolyn Holderread Heggen and Rhoda Keener provide eight hours of training in effective caring for self and others, compassionate listening, and God's healing in transforming loss and grief.

**Upcoming** Sister Care seminars are planned for the following dates and locations:

- **August 26–27, 2011** Mennonite Church of Normal, Normal, Illinois (Illinois and Central District)
- **September 17–18, 2011** Swan Lake Camp, South Dakota (Central Plains)
- **September 23–25, 2011** Strawberry Lake Camp, Minnesota (North Central)
- **October 21–22, 2011** Ashton Community Fellowship, Sarasota, Florida (Southeast)
- **November 11–12, 2011** Central Kansas (South Central and Western District)

For information on how to register or to schedule a Sister Care seminar in your area, contact the Mennonite Women USA office at 866-866-2872 or at <office@MennoniteWomenUSA.org>. (See the article by Holderread Heggen pages 4–6.) 



*Terri J. Plank  
Brenneman*



*Carolyn Holder-  
read Heggen*



*Rhoda Keener*

# Across the Border

## Do-Over in Guatemala

by *Marcella Hershberger*

When I was a kid, if we didn't like how something turned out, we'd yell, "Do-over!" in the hopes of getting another chance. Fortunately God is a God of second chances, a God of "doing a new thing" and "a future with hope." On the foreign soil of Central America I sustained devastating wounds; there I returned, several decades later, for deep healing.

At age 21, I went to Honduras to fulfill college requirements. While there, I lived for six weeks in a home that was not safe. From the first night, the adult sons still living at home were sexually inappropriate, including some physical force. We students had been told that as guests in another culture we were expected to "make it work," no complaining. So for six weeks, in an ongoing state of shock, I tried to "make it work." I felt alone, unprotected and abandoned by God. Shock turned into anger at God.

Twenty-six years later, I was sick of the terrible depression that sucked me under every spring. I wanted my life back. I would do whatever it took. I called a therapist and began the agonizing journey. Sitting in the waiting room, I'd pray, "God, take me where I have to go." And God did—all the way back to Central America! Twice!!

For reasons I couldn't explain, I felt compelled to go back to Honduras. I needed to find the one brother and talk to him. I wondered if I was crazy. Then "it just so happened" that Linda Shelly, Mennonite Mission Network's director for Latin America, was taking a vacation—to Honduras—and invited me to go along. "It just so happened" she knew someone who knew someone who was able to track down the one brother. He said yes, come. Linda went with me and translated. He welcomed us. I said what I needed to say. He responded more graciously than I dared hope for. I got some answers and some closure; new infor-

# Across the Ocean

mation also opened new issues.

After this emotional encounter, I went with Linda as she visited her Honduran Mennonite friends. They hosted us and I was safe. The men were all so kind to me. This helped me let go of the poisonous feelings toward Spanish-speaking men that had festered in me for years. Knowing they were my brothers in the global church was very healing to me. We went to church and the language I had associated with pain I heard in praise and worship. I was overwhelmed and cried with relief.

The trip back to Honduras helped resolve some important things, but opened up another layer of abandonment and anger that went back to losing my beloved “Daddy” at age five. For two more years I continued slogging through what I had never expressed. I wanted to be done. God was not done. “It just so happened” that my boss, James Krabill, was going to Guatemala to work on his Spanish for two weeks. He invited me and my husband to go along.

It felt like I finally had the experience I should have had in 1981. This time, instead of living with two dangerous men, I traveled with two safe men. I was not alone. At first, my heart sank when I was assigned a male teacher, Carlos, for my five hours per day of individual tutoring. I had hoped for a woman. “Abuelito (Grandfather) Carlos” was seven years older than I—just like the one brother in 1981. But Carlos was the teacher I needed. When it was time to switch teachers, I requested to keep Carlos. “It so happened” that my Guatemalan host family had the same structure as my 1981 Honduran family—a woman with two sons and a daughter—but they were warm and considerate. Guatemala brought closure: God’s gift of a healing “do-over.” 📷



*Marcella Hershberger and her individual tutor in Guatemala, Carlos.*

*Courtesy photo*

## Mennonite women pastors: A long bridge to cross

by *Linda Gehman Peachey*

One hundred years ago, in January 1911, Ann Allebach was ordained at First Mennonite Church in Philadelphia, the first woman to be ordained in a Mennonite church in the U.S. (*Full Circle* by Mary Lou Cummings.) That same year, Anna Zernike became the first woman minister to serve a Mennonite congregation in the Netherlands.

The early 1900's were filled with much ferment and new possibilities. Industry was expanding but many workers—including women and children—were forced to work long hours in terrible conditions. This resulted in lots of unrest and organizing for change. In 1908, for instance, 15,000 women marched through New York City demanding shorter hours, better pay and voting rights. And in 1911, the first International Women's Day celebration was observed, with events in Austria, Denmark, Germany and Switzerland.

Nevertheless, exercising leadership in Mennonite congregations was still difficult for women. Although Allebach and Zernike found some initial recognition, most of their ministry was outside Mennonite circles. Zernike, for instance, served over 25 years with the Dutch Protestant Union. And Allebach became deeply involved in church ministries in New York City, following her graduate studies there.

In 1916, she became pastor of Sunnyside Reformed Church in Long Island. The *New York World* noted that services in this congregation often opened with an invitation:

If any of you here present are sick or hungry and who need employment or help in your homes, come to me after the service and I will help you. And the Rev. Miss Allebach does help. There are many men and women in New York City who can corroborate this...who know that this woman minister not only preaches but practices the Gospel.

Unfortunately, Allebach died of a heart attack a few months after this article appeared, at the age of 44. Perhaps she would

have found more opportunities within the Mennonite church had she lived longer. Instead, Cummings concludes that the Mennonite community in which she grew up did not quite know what to make of her, and soon forgot her ministry.

In the decades which followed, Mennonite women continued to actively serve their congregations and the world in many ways. But it took over 60 years until another woman was ordained in a Mennonite church in the US. Emma Richards was ordained in 1973 at Lombard Mennonite Church by the Illinois Conference of the Mennonite Church, and in 1976, Marilyn Miller was ordained by the Western District Conference of the General Conference Mennonite Church to serve as co-pastor of Arvada Mennonite Church, Colorado.

Since then, many women have been ordained throughout the Mennonite Church. Currently, about 310 women and 914 men are ordained for pastoral and specialized ministry roles<sup>1</sup>. While these figures are encouraging, women are still more likely to serve as chaplains or in associate or co-pastor positions. According to a “2005 Survey of Women and Men in Ministry,” almost half of the women respondents served in these roles compared to 14.4% of men. Meanwhile, 45% of men were lead pastors, compared to 17.7% of women<sup>2</sup>.

On the positive side, the 2005 survey indicated that 82% of women pastors and 77% of men were “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with their pastoral role. Yet difficulties remain. In this survey, 64% of women reported that “structural or attitudinal inequalities related to gender” is one of the top three challenges they experience in ministry. It is still more difficult for women to find jobs, especially as lead pastors, and many long for more support and advocacy from church leaders.

Women were also twice as likely to report challenges in balancing ministry with family and other roles (57% to 28%). No doubt this results from traditional expectations that women are still primary care-givers in the family and congregation, even if they are also handling other roles.

Certainly, there has been much movement over the past century in acknowledging and blessing women’s gifts and ministry in the church. In the years ahead, may we continue to honor and celebrate the ways God has created and called all of us to work together in mutuality, respect and love. 📖

1 Statistics provided by Nancy Kauffman, MC USA denominational minister, to research assistant Sarah Thompson for an essay by Gail Gerber Koontz for a book to be published by the Institute of Mennonite Studies in honor of Emma Richards.

2 Nath, Pamela <[www.mennoniteusa.org](http://www.mennoniteusa.org)>.



*Ann Jemima Allebach, first woman ordained in a Mennonite church in the US.*

*Photo from Mennonite Year Book and Almanac, 1919.*

# Seeking sequels to build bridges

by *Heidi Martin*



Some books require a sequel. Surely you know what I mean. Laurie Oswald Robinson's book *Forever Family* is one such book. Unfortunately there is no book two, though I wonder if the pages of this vulnerable story will call others forward to create more resources—in other words, the “book twos.”

*Forever Family* is the personal account of Al and Laurie Oswald Robinson and their experience as foster-to-adopt parents with a little girl named Sarah. Though the book is informative academically, reading the pages is like reading Oswald Robinson's personal diary. The chapters are short, easy to read and raw with the depth of genuine emotions. At times I nearly stopped to double-check that I picked up a book and not an intimate journal. For example:

Would the system decide to send [Sarah] back home? Or would the courts terminate parental rights? Would grandparents or other kin emerge as caretakers, or would we be able to adopt her?...History is littered with stories of terrible scars people have suffered when others in power take them from their loved ones without notice. Our story would not make the history books or parallel the horror of such incidents. But the possibility of losing Sarah created terror in us. (37, 78)

These fears plagued Oswald Robinson for two years while she mothered Sarah, affecting Oswald Robinson's character, her faith and her marriage.

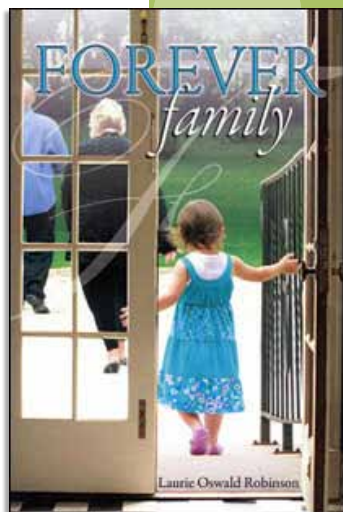
In this personal account, Oswald Robinson also describes the challenges of the legal system and the weaknesses within it that burden so many families. The expected difficulty was allowing other people to make decisions regarding her “daughter.” She writes: “Foster families, including us, come into the system with good intentions. But all the best intentions in the world don't undo the fact that many of the decisions about Sarah's life would be made by professionals and not by us” (41).

The frustration described above leads to the constant ques-

tions of "bonding versus blood." Which is stronger? Who has more say? Who should make decisions? The mother who brought the child into the world and is connected by the irrevocable commitment of blood or the mother who cared enough for the child to take her in and help her grow? The subject is looked at both personally and in an essay format at the end of the book.

The subject is made even more complicated by the story's conclusion. It begins when author Sister Helen Prejean challenges Oswald Robinson to befriend her supposed enemies, Sarah's grandparents. Prejean's words carried weight as she "had given spiritual direction to death row inmates and witnessed six deaths by state execution. If anyone was clear about forgiveness and justice and suffering, it was her" (92). So Oswald Robinson made small steps toward communication and civility with Sarah's grandparents. The moments are small but they are moments of reconciliation, of mercy, of grace, that go beyond human power or comprehension. They are moments of miracles and moments when bridges are crossed.

Oswald Robinson achieves success in helping others cross bridges through the intimacy of *Forever Family*. She leads the reader on the bridge across raging waters. So we walk forward, but the bridge is not complete. Though Oswald Robinson laid the first few planks, the conversation is only beginning. We need more planks to reach the opposite shore. We need more conversation and more resources. We need those "book twos." 📖



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# Response to Sister Question:



Marian J. Bauman

**Editor's note:** Each issue, we print responses to our Sister Question. The question for **July–August** was: What (or who) has helped me on my healing journey?

**Marian J. Bauman, Harrisonburg, Virginia, responded:** In my nine-year journey toward healing from an unexpected separation and divorce I am learning valuable lessons—whether I want to or not!

- Each person/family must deal with pain and loss in their own way. Most of us aren't trained to deal with broken marriages.
- Allow yourself the space to grieve deeply and experience emotions in non-destructive ways.
- Draw support from trusted friends/family/support groups.
- Attempt to hold your head high and not be ashamed or embarrassed. Don't allow "the big D" to set your attitude about yourself.
- Support your children in positive ways. That is a difficult one when everyone is hurting.
- In time, allow this experience to make you a better person.
- Forgiveness is a process, and you may not know where you are on the continuum.
- Remember that God loves you and offers you grace. You are God's workmanship; you are complete in him.
- **PASS IT ON!** Support others in similar situations. 📌

## Cup of Water

*Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward (Matthew 10:42).*

**Support Sister Care seminars**, a ministry of Mennonite Women USA. The seminars meet women where they are, help them identify and learn from God's healing grace in their lives, and equip them to participate in the transforming work of Jesus.

Your gifts support a portion of MW USA's costs of developing and presenting this resource for the church. Sister Care seminars are hosted regionally by local Mennonite Women. You can help this ministry by sending a gift to be used "where needed most."

For more information about Sister Care seminars see page 15 in this issue of *timbrel* and see our Sister Care web page <<http://www.mennonitewomenusa.org/Ministries/Pages/Sister-Care.aspx>>.

**To donate, send your check to MW USA, 718 N. Main, Newton, KS 67114-1819**, or donate online at <<http://www.mennonitewomenusa.org/Give/Pages/2centsandaprayer.aspx>>. 📌

# Healing stories intersect

by Rhoda Keener

Singing has never been my forte. Growing up, I was baffled by four-part harmony and unable to match the dreaded metronome in piano lessons. I remember being laughed at in second grade when I sang out of tune. As an adult I sing the melody, but prefer listening to music more than singing. I wonder if God will someday heal this part of my life.

Several years ago I presented an introduction to the Sister Care seminar for a small group of seven women. I began by asking them to think of needs of women in their congregations. As they named "depression, family, health issues, etc.," I created a list on the white board. Then an older woman said, "I have needs." Not wanting to intrude, I paraphrased and wrote, "Our needs." I went on with the presentation and near the end of the hour returned to the list.

The woman spoke again, "I have needs." Realizing we had missed her plea the first time, I invited her to share. She told how an auto accident took the lives of her husband and son; her son was the father of three young children. She added, "The church supports my daughter-in-law and children as they should, but no one takes care of me."

"Is there anything we can do for you?" I asked. She responded, "I just want someone to sing that song, 'Be still my soul.'"

"Would you like us to sing it?" I asked. When she nodded, I turned to the group inquiring if someone could lead, but no one offered. Feeling a familiar inner terror, I began singing, "Be still my soul," and the women joined, "The Lord is on thy side. Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain." We continued, sometimes humming, sometimes remembering words.

As she left I asked, "Did the song help?" "Oh yes," she said, "That's all I needed."

Recently I met one of the women who helped to sing. Recalling that sacred moment, I said, "You know, I don't sing..." She interrupted, "But you did." Yes, I did sing, and perhaps moved a little closer to my own healing, as that dear sister's story intersected with my story in ways only God could have brought together. 📌



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## Women in Conversation 2012

“Into the Wilderness: The Journey of God’s Beloved.” The tale of the marriage between the prophet Hosea and his wife Gomer is as shocking today as it was 2700 years ago. Its portrayal of passion and heartache, misplaced longings and relentless hope, makes the book of Hosea seem an odd inclusion in the canon. Is it a scandal? Is it a fairytale? Or is it something else completely—a bold invitation to rediscover the inconceivable depth of God’s devotion to us? Come to a Women in Conversation retreat Apr. 13–15, 2012 in Mt. Pleasant, Penn. or Apr. 27–29, 2012 in Hesston, Kan. to find out.

The speaker at both retreats is Meghan L. Good, the lead pastor of Albany Mennonite Church in Albany, Oregon. She received her BA in Philosophy and Biblical Studies from Gordon College in Wenham, Mass., and her MDiv. from Duke University Divinity School in Durham, NC. An addicted reader with a passion for preaching, she believes in the power of a well-told story to transform hearts and lives. 



*Meghan L. Good*

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