

What a half-Italian Jersey girl is doing in a peace church

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I remember sitting on the floor in the living room of a Houghton College professor, part of a circle of would-be Menno adults, some students (like me) who were curious about this budding worshiping community, and some students who'd grown

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up Mennonite, with last names like Stoltzfus and Gingerich—though at the time I had no inkling that in some worlds those names would mean more than other last names. I remember sitting, belly full of tea and warm homemade bread with honey, holding my Bible in my lap, open to Matthew chapter 6. I remember that moment because it was the first time it seemed obvious to me from scripture that Jesus taught nonviolence.

I remember the first time I heard of a listening committee—possibly in that very living room. These people take listening that seriously? Enough to form a committee just to listen through a whole event? (I didn't yet know about the underbelly of committifying things, but I still think it's a beautiful practice.)

I remember the appearance of the mutual aid box at our seminary's reception desk, and a matter-of-fact e-mail from our campus pastor explaining the need and inviting anyone to give. This was just a habit of being community, of being the body of Christ together.

It was also there in Elkhart, Indiana, that I first heard the name Swartzendruber. I am from northern New Jersey where I was surrounded by Italian- and Irish-Americans, and a large enough Jewish population to have played with plastic dreidels in elementary school each year at Hanukkah. Swartzendruber—that

couldn't possibly be one word. It was the name of a local furniture-making business, and I heard it as Swartz & Druber. That's all one word? Really? Wow. No wonder you can't get good pizza around here.

That was one type of culture shock. Another was my first experience of singing "Lift your glad voices" at the end of a funeral held in the seminary's chapel. "We shall not die"? I mean, I know we believe Jesus defied death, but this kind of triumphal singing at a funeral? It was a little much. I was stunned, maybe even embarrassed. When I mentioned it to a classmate, he told me it was traditional to close funerals with this song. These people don't mess around.

Oh, and the singing! Long before I knew the sound of a congregation singing four-part harmony in full voice, our Houghton-area "Mennogroup," as we called it (officially Sojourners Mennonite Fellowship), was learning songs from the blue hymnal, week by week.¹ These words and harmonies were healing for me. "Joyful is the dark." "We are the young—our lives are a mystery." "Bring forth the city of God!" "Since love is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?" A new, deeply honest, and life-affirming way was opening. We even learned and practiced 118 (why do people keep saying 606? I get it now), standing in those living rooms, so we could be official.²

I remember a seminary professor's clarity, honesty, and humility in admitting that while we may choose to reject the use of violence, we live in a world governed by force and the threat of it, and we rely on systems built on both. I needed this modeling: to see someone who had committed his life to living and studying and teaching this way of peace sitting with the messiness of this call and these claims without attempting to resolve them. I also had peers at seminary who questioned reflexive calling of the police. We could think together about this. We planned, led, and joined in worship of the Lamb who reigns, against all evidence to the contrary.

To me, Mennonite readings of the world and of faith, which hold together a firm—at times brave—realism about what's wrong in the world and a completely unreasonable hope in the possibility of redemption, felt true to both the pathos and the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. There was no unscathed victor, no swift

triumph over evil, but a painful, personally costly defiance of death and the powers that be. Without the option of meeting force with greater force, there was the naked necessity of trusting God, and God's goodness, and God's constant work making all things new. I continue to be drawn to the tenderness and vulnerability of this ecclesiology, side-by-side with a "damn the torpedoes" persistence. I see that in the story of Jesus. This year during Holy Week, I was especially caught by his agony in the garden. He is scared and weak and pleading—we see the tension of a human being who wants to do the right thing, and wishes it could pass to someone else. And then there is his savvy as he faces Pilate, in dignity, claiming the authority that is his, speaking the truth though it likely will make no difference.

Throwing my lot in with the Mennonite tradition awakened in me that human desire to risk on behalf of something bigger than ourselves, or on behalf of a beloved. I think any true encounter with the gospel, with Jesus, does that to a person; it happened for

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me in the process of becoming Mennonite. But this risking is not the sacrifice spoken of by politicians and praised in soldiers. In fact, lately, as I learn more about the scars borne by combat veterans, I see we are not talking about an individual's choice to risk his or her life. Rather, in training soldiers to kill reflexively and sending them to kill on our behalf, as a nation we are choosing to sacrifice their basic human moral instincts, and we often ignore or push away their pain when they return, all in the process of preserving our way of life—or so goes a popular national

rhetoric. Emotional and relational nonviolence is perhaps the most challenging because it requires long-haul commitment and daily practice, which I believe lays a foundation for refusing to resort to physical violence.

What I have learned in becoming Mennonite, and in becoming more fully human, is not about sacrifice. It is something about moving toward abundant life. It involves my whole inspired body/embodyed mind-soul. It touches how and what I eat, how I speak to strangers, my understanding of money and how much I

need. Again, things any Christian could (even should!) say about following Jesus, but which I came home to among Mennonites, for whom living simply, honoring participatory community, and finding peaceful alternatives to violent systems were assumed. My path into the hope and the failings of this beautiful and flawed peace church continues to mean facing what is not as it should be in ourselves and our dealings with one another and opening those parts and those places to the compassionate gaze of Christ. This is very grand and easy to say. How does it look in real life?

For the last several years, I've been working with the reality and practice of vulnerability. I find it is woven all through my call, especially the call to live and speak God's justice and God's peace. As I follow generations of spiritual seekers in haltingly opening my deepest places to God—and to my spiritual director—in trust, I have found my own heart to be some of the rockiest soil for sowing peace. What I mean is: the church that shaped me did not teach me to welcome my unwanted parts. The church culture in which I grew up taught me about original sin, taught me regularly to question my motives, taught me that human beings are not—that I am not—trustworthy. It was not a very kind environment for compassion, particularly the gentle compassion for self that is the fertile soil of peace with one's neighbor, to say nothing of one's enemy. Unintentionally we all participated in creating an environment better suited to judging ourselves and others, keeping shame hidden and unspoken, than to opening ourselves to forgiveness and mercy and the depths of healing that flow from our Creator. Still, there was real love there, and the vast beauty of the scriptures, and people bursting with pride to see me baptized. These were the people who planted deeply in me the reflexive assumption that scripture is normative for our living. Here I first experienced the words and taste and touch and smell of communion, and cold, windy sunrise services by the river at the park, with my pastor playing his trumpet to accompany the rising of Jesus.

Yet church did not give me practice at making peace, with myself or with anyone who did not fit the moral code I had been given. Tensions and inconsistencies were to be resolved as simply and neatly as possible, and sin was to be cut off as soon as it was noticed. As I became a regular in our small "Menno group," I saw

a willingness to talk about hard things, an honesty about tensions within us and about the mess of wrongdoing in which we are implicated beyond our choosing. In my seminary professors, and in many beloved friends before and since, I saw a remarkable vulnerability modeled, and I recognized in it a necessary and beautiful and frightening part of living fully as human beings created in the image of God. Indeed, it seems vulnerability is a divine characteristic, and in being transformed into the image of Christ, we become more vulnerable, not less. And mysteriously, only in sitting with my own inner discrepancies can I find what is mine to do, find where the life is. As I allow wanted and unwanted bits of myself to occupy the same space, in the presence of Love, I move toward wholeness and reduce my need for external tensions to be quickly resolved.

To be a peace church is to be vulnerable, despite our many reminders to ourselves that peacemaking and the renunciation of violence were the basic orientation and assumptions of the early church, and despite our belief (quite justified, if at times irritating to our other Christian brothers and sisters) that every part of Christ's body should claim or reclaim this identity.

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We are so small. Such a tiny fraction of the Christians in the United States and in the world. We grow weary of professing things most people think are crazy, unrealistic, and weird—especially in a context where shows of dominating force are generally applauded or reluctantly deemed necessary. In the midst of this, we must continue to nurture vulnerable love as our path to pursuing peace and renouncing violence.

In becoming a Mennonite pastor and leader, I have bumped up against our (Anglo) comfort with significant wealth, our scarce ability to pursue economic justice or practice mutual intercultural relationships. The road from charity to justice is long. Many of our Mennonite systems are ones in which oppressive, culturally biased, sometimes overtly racist assumptions and actions can go unaddressed. These are opportunities to bring unwanted things

into the light, to move from shame into compassion, to be willing to learn and be healed and transformed. There is space here for making peace with ourselves. So we may do justly and honor our own humanity in Christ while honoring the Spirit of Christ in others.

Perhaps it is because early on I was handed such a low view of humanity that I am drawn to the persistent, absurd hope of Anabaptism. No more absurd, though, than a Lamb who is also a shepherd, a God who is an infant and then a poor, traveling teacher, who is made a spectacle of state torture before trust and love are vindicated. This narrative is attractive because it gathers up the truth of our sober observations of the world alongside our wild hopes that God will redeem all things. Plainly the world is alight with beauty we stutter to name in the moments we are undone by wonder and love—and simultaneously, the world is full of unspeakable horrors, cruelty, and violation which we wield against each other and God’s good earth. And still we go on singing at the end of funerals, “Jesus hath risen, and we shall not die.” Absurd! And achingly vulnerable—as vulnerable as the God who in Christ entrusts us—us!—with the message of reconciliation. Being a Mennonite Christian continues to pull me in because it seems—we seem—to smile knowingly at the unlikeliness of it all and go on believing, for all our unbelief, with spiritual resources for facing our shadows, aware of our smallness and still walking the vulnerable way of Jesus. That sounds like life to me.

So I’m in, and grateful to be in for the long haul—though I admit the lack of cannoli at fellowship meals is at times disappointing.

Notes

¹ *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1992).

² “Praise God from whom” (Dedication Anthem) is #118 in *Hymnal: A Worship Book*; that hymnal replaced *The Mennonite Hymnal* (1969), in which this doxology was #606.

About the author

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