

Martyrdom and double tellings

Remembering resistance and trauma

Susanne Guenther Loewen

“‘YOU MUST BE WILLING TO DIE!’ I pondered his dark advice. I scratched out the word DIE and wrote LIVE.”

–Miriam Toews¹

“Out of so many martyrs, how do we live?”

–Audrey Poetker-Thiessen²

As we commemorate the five-hundredth anniversary of the Anabaptist movement, we are reminded of the martyrs whose deaths marked the birth of our tradition, many of whom are immortalized on the pages of the *Martyrs Mirror*. Beginning with the death of Christ, this rather intimidating volume recounts the stories of Christians who have died for their faith, complete with grisly illustrations of torture and executions. A large portion is devoted to the Anabaptist martyrs of the sixteenth century, as it was compiled about one hundred years later by Dutch Mennonite pastor Thieleman van Braght to remind his privileged and complacent fellow Mennonites of the radical faith of their spiritual forbears.³

Because 40 to 50 percent of the Reformation martyrs were Anabaptists (a large percentage for such a small movement), martyr stories became identity-shaping for the early Anabaptists and into the present, thanks in part to the ubiquity of the *Martyrs Mirror* in Mennonite homes.⁴ *Tongue Screws and Testimonies*, a 2010 collection of poems, stories, and essays inspired by the *Martyrs Mirror*, attests to the ongoing hold that martyrdom has on the Mennonite imagination, as martyrs are viewed “with the same

1 Miriam Toews, *Imra Voth* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2011), 251.

2 Quoted in Kirsten Eve Beachy, “Introduction,” in *Tongue Screws and Testimonies: Poems, Stories, and Essays Inspired by the Martyr’s Mirror*, edited by Kirsten Eve Beachy (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2010), 23.

3 John S. Oyer and Robert S. Kreider, *Mirror of the Martyrs* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1990), 10.

4 C. Arnold Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ: The Anabaptist Tradition*, Traditions of Christian Spirituality Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 160.

reverence as other groups treat their saints.” Kristen Eve Beachy recounts, “I learned about the *Martyrs Mirror* by osmosis, when I read it in my grandmother’s basement. . . . It thrilled me to the core, it was too horrible to speak of, it challenged me, it humbled me, it made me proud. I was intrigued by the radical women, the revenge fantasies, the transmission of historical trauma, the implicit question: ‘Could you do it?’”⁵

The centrality of the *Martyrs Mirror* signifies, however, that the martyrs have been remembered in a particular way—as unwavering heroes of the faith, as triumphant over their captors and executioners whose efforts to

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kill their bodies only succeeded in securing the salvation of their souls. More often than not, the *Martyrs Mirror* depicts them accepting their deaths not only fearlessly but also *gladly*. Maeyken Wens, who was burned at the stake in 1573, reportedly said, “The Lord takes away all fear; I did not know what to do for joy, when I was sentenced.” George Raeck apparently “cheerfully stepped forward to the executioner, and exclaimed with a

joyful heart, ‘Here I forsake wife and children, house and home, body and life, for faith and the divine truth.’”⁶

Such accounts raise questions: Were the martyrs grateful, or even overjoyed, to be going to their deaths? What does this reading of martyrdom convey about suffering and faith to those who survived, who now carry this legacy forward? In what follows, I propose viewing the martyr stories through the lens of trauma theology, recognizing their double-edged nature as stories both of the perseverance and strength of the faithful and of tragic, traumatic violence. Using Chris Huebner’s characterization of martyrs as neither victims nor victors and Serene Jones’s concept of “double tellings” of traumatic events, in which the complexity of the traumatic experience necessitates multiple narratives, I take the position that the martyrs must be remembered as both victims and victors if we are to fully honour them these centuries later.⁷

5 Beachy, “Introduction,” 22, 24.

6 *Martyrs Mirror* quoted by Stephanie Krehbiel, “Staying Alive: How Martyrdom Made Me a Warrior,” in *Tongue Screws and Testimonies*, 136–37.

7 Chris K. Huebner, *A Precarious Peace: Yoderian Explorations on Theology, Knowledge, and Identity* (Waterloo, ON: Herald, 2006), 198–200. Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace*:

The victory of the Lamb: Martyr narratives as resistance

The template for martyr narratives has strong biblical roots. Acts 7–8 recounts the stoning of early church deacon Stephen (incidentally, the third martyr in the *Martyrs Mirror*, just after Jesus Christ and John the Baptist), shaping the narrative in such a way that Stephen’s death is a clear echo of Christ’s. As they are stoning him, Stephen prays almost the same words that Jesus spoke from the cross, saying, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit,” and, “Lord do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:59–60).⁸ Already in the Bible, the first Christian martyrdom is understood to reflect spiritual triumph linked with the cross.

The early Anabaptists, in their context of hostile persecution, looked to biblical portrayals of martyrdom as mirrors of their experience, which they interpreted as “the baptism of blood” in 1 John 5:7–8.⁹ According to the early Anabaptists, Jesus’s example shows us three kinds of baptism: baptism of water (the outward, public sign or ordinance), baptism of Spirit (the inner, personal transformation of receiving the Holy Spirit), and baptism of blood (the suffering or even death that could result from the life of faith). During the Middle Ages, this “blood” had been understood spiritually, as dying to sin and new life through discipleship. But for the early Anabaptists facing the threat of martyrdom, the baptism of blood took on a much more literal meaning. Historian Arnold Snyder notes, “The testimony of the Bible, read through the lens of brutal persecution, convinced the Anabaptists that the ‘baptism of blood’ was to be expected for those who had accepted the baptisms of the Spirit and of water, and had set out to follow Jesus in life.”¹⁰ Since Jesus’s life had led to the cross, Anabaptists had reason to believe their lives might lead to violent deaths.¹¹

Using passages like this one from 1 John, the early Anabaptists made sense of the suffering they were experiencing by connecting it, first, to the triumph of Jesus’s own violent death, which was overcome in resurrection, second, to depictions of the early Christian martyrs as triumphant and

Theology in a Ruptured World (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 80–81; cf. 13, where Jones defines trauma as “events in which one experiences the threat of annihilation.”

8 Jesus’s words from the cross are “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Luke 23:46) and “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).

9 “There are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three agree” (1 John 5:7–8).

10 Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ*, 162, 160.

11 Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ*, 164.

victorious, and third, as receiving their reward from God in the book of Revelation. On one level, it was a way of resisting—of refusing to be defeated by persecution and martyrdom, of refusing to be victims by insisting that God was on their side and that their deaths were not meaningless but holy sacrifices, examples of redemptive suffering. Chris Huebner speaks of this as martyrdom’s “potential to gesture beyond the interminably violent dance of victory and victimhood,”¹² to transcend those simplistic, either/or categorizations. Additionally, given the way that trauma tends to rob

one of language, these narratives played an empowering role, returning one form of meaning and voice to those otherwise facing unspeakable suffering (sometimes enforced with tongue screws).

This understanding of martyrdom recalls Serene Jones’s reading of the encounter between the risen Jesus and the two bewildered disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24 as a trauma narrative. The two disciples, survivors of the trauma of witnessing Jesus’s crucifixion,

are experiencing the “disordered imagination” of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Their garbled accounts of what they have just witnessed parallel the PTSD symptom of sudden, intrusive memories of the violent event, “throwing one momentarily back into a state of terror,” which overwhelms one’s memory, ability to speak, sense of agency, and so on.¹³ But on the road, the risen “Jesus steps into the playback loop that holds their imaginations, and he speaks,” retelling the story such that “the repetitive cycle is broken, and their imaginations are reframed around a shared table” of peace and belonging.¹⁴

What starts out as a trauma response—a way to make sense of a terrifying reality and to give voice to unspeakable horrors endured and wit-

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12 Huebner, *Prekarious Peace*, 198–200. Huebner goes on to make the case that it is equally violent to claim to be a victor or a victim, as they are simply flip sides of attempts to gain “power and control.” His point is that martyrs are neither victims nor victors but eschatologically other. This critique of victimhood in particular is called into question by feminist trauma theologies and critiques of the long history of gendered power dynamics. Following the latter, I am rather claiming here that martyrs are both victims and victors.

13 Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 16, 18–19.

14 Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 39–40.

nessed—over time comes to be theologized as God’s will. In other words, by the time of the *Martyrs Mirror*, the martyrs are idealized as superhuman examples who harboured no doubts and went joyfully to their deaths with God’s blessing. Their deaths are celebrated rather than mourned. The *tragedy* of the violence and trauma they suffered goes unacknowledged.

Mourning the martyrs: Tragedy and trauma

Feminist trauma theologians have seriously questioned the Christian theological tendency to rush toward redemption and victory, specifically for the way it sidelines those who have experienced the shattering effects of trauma. Shelly Rambo quotes a survivor suffering from PTSD who says, “The church didn’t provide me with a place to bring my experience” but responded with “theological silence,” a rush “to proclaim the good news before its time.”¹⁵ I suggest that this could also be the issue with the sanitized, triumphalist martyr narratives of the *Martyrs Mirror*. Recognizing the way that trauma “remains” with survivors, such that “‘death’ persists in life,” Rambo’s response is to call for a theology of “the middle,” an ambiguous, uncertain space—neither cross nor resurrection but Holy Saturday, the day that Jesus was dead, and, according to tradition, descended into hell.¹⁶ Based on Jesus’s call in John 15 to “remain” or abide in his love, Rambo concludes that we are called to “remain” in this way with those who suffer trauma and thus to bear witness that even in the deathly depths of trauma, love is what remains.¹⁷

Many of the contributors to *Tongue Screws and Testimonies* likewise push back against the one-dimensional depiction of martyrs going joyfully to their deaths. Stephanie Krehbiel writes, “Joy? Now looking back, I think this is the cruelest use of the *Martyrs Mirror* to which I fell prey: the idea that not only do our beliefs invite a painful death, but that we should give it a rapturous welcome. Jesus Christ himself didn’t live up to these standards. ‘My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me,’ he said in Gethsemane (Matt. 26:39). And on the cross: ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ (Matt. 27:46 KJV).”¹⁸ To gloss over the pain and trauma of the martyrs—or worse, to take a masochistic, even “pornograph-

15 Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 2–3.

16 Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 156, 159.

17 Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 104.

18 Stephanie Krehbiel, “Staying Alive,” 136.

ic” pleasure in it, as the gory descriptions and etchings of torture scenes seem to¹⁹—objectifies their suffering and the undeserved, unjust violence inflicted on them, ostensibly for the purpose of our spiritual edification.

On reading the *Martyrs Mirror* for the first time, Sofia Samatar recounts feeling disoriented by its “catalogue of pain.” She writes, “Trauma is a form of time travel . . . capable of generating many things: reverence, grief, commitment to one’s beliefs, solidarity with the dead. Anger, too,

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at least in my case, outrage at the injustice, at their helplessness, at my helplessness because I couldn’t go back and save them. The pity of it.”²⁰ The poetry of Sarah Klassen likewise helpfully delves into these kinds of ambiguities in the experiences of the martyrs themselves, depicting them with much more complexity than in the *Martyrs Mirror*. For instance, in Klassen’s poems, one martyr “bravely” sings “her terrified heart out” at her execution, while at the last moment, others “can’t remember what [they’re] dying for” or decide that they “really want to live” and “not die,” “not even for Almighty God’s truth”—but “it’s too late.”²¹ These depictions allow doubt, fear, and pain to shine through the martyrs’ final moments, ultimately humanizing them. This is a way of honouring and grieving their traumas rather than celebrating them, allowing us to remember both their tragedy and their triumph, to see them as both victims and victors.

This double-edged remembrance is what Jones advocates in her concept of “double tellings,” the need for multiple narratives to make sense of traumatic experiences. Sounding much like the Mennonite tendency to tell and retell martyr narratives, Jones notes that, with regard to the cross, Christians are “obsessively committed to telling and retelling the story. We preach it, over and over again, in the hope that people will com-

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19 In calling them “pornographic,” Krehbiel reflects, “As a young woman . . . I’m at no loss for narratives that depict splayed, exploited bodies that look like mine.” Krehbiel, “Staying Alive,” 140–41. Cf. Rosie Andrious, “Violating Women in the Name of God: Legacies of Remembered Violence,” in *Feminist Trauma Theologies: Body, Scripture, and Church in Critical Perspective*, edited by Karen O’Donnell and Katie Cross (London: SCM Press, 2020), 134–36, 139.

20 Sofia Samatar, *The White Mosque: A Memoir* (New York: Catapult, 2022), 178–82.

21 Sarah Klassen, *Dangerous Elements* (Kingston, ON: Quarry Press, 1998), 119, 118, 117.

prehend it anew and be moved. We write it over and over again in novels, poetry, and theatre—we paint it, sculpt it, carve it, hone it, stitch it, sing it, play it—all the time hoping that if we repeat it often enough, we might succeed in unlocking its secret.”²² This is because it exceeds straightforward understanding. As a trauma narrative, it overwhelms us; we both know and don’t know what happened. For Jones, trauma narratives require re-telling from multiple angles. Speaking of a group of women survivors of abuse who met at her church, Jones observes, “Sometimes we needed to give an account of what it meant to have been a *victim* of overwhelming violence and to have come undone in the wake of its horror. Sometimes, however, we needed to tell the same story in a manner that cast us as *fighting feminists* [reclaiming our agency to protect ourselves from harm]. Both stories could be told at the same time by a single person without any contradiction. It even seemed that the complexity of our lives demanded such double tellings.”²³

Lives lost, lives remembered

I find it remarkable that Dirk Willems, arguably the most famous early Anabaptist martyr, is primarily remembered for something he did, not for how he died. His page in the *Martyrs Mirror* does not depict him being burnt at the stake; instead, it depicts him in his act of saving his pursuer when he was attempting to escape from jail. This speaks to a remembrance of Dirk’s life and agency—including a struggle to escape the violence—rather than a sole focus on his death.²⁴ Anneken Jans’s story similarly includes a letter she left for her baby son, outlining the core ethics of her Anabaptist faith. She writes, “Where you hear of a poor, simple, cast off little flock which is despised and rejected by the world, join them. . . . Honour the Lord in the works of your hands, and let the light of the Gospel shine through you. Love your neighbour. Deal with an open, warm heart thy bread to the hungry. Clothe the naked, and suffer not to have anything

22 Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 73.

23 Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 80–81.

24 For alternative readings of the Dirk Willems story, see Lisa Schirch, “Eight Ways to Strengthen Mennonite Peacebuilding,” *Conrad Grebel Review* 35, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 361–84; Kimberly D. Schmidt, “Run, Dirk, Run! Wrestling with the Willems Story,” in *Resistance: Confronting Violence, Power, and Abuse within Peace Churches*, edited by Cameron Altaras and Carol Penner (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2022), 238–49.

twofold; for there are always some who lack.”²⁵ She calls her son not primarily to die but to live—simply, generously, and faithfully. Likewise, the martyrs’ tortured deaths are not the only thing we remember about them. Instead, we remember the lives of faith they were able to lead before they were snuffed out.

Krehbiel calls for a similar change in focus:

*I need stories that give me hope. I also need stories that offer me agency, the power to act and to create change. The best stories, the honest ones, won’t hide the sometimes deadly cost of defying oppression. But here’s the point I believe is essential to morally instructive stories: the purpose of the action is to make the world a better place. Death may be a consequence, but death is not the point. The thing I dislike about the way the martyr stories are told in Mennonite circles is how we’ve come to focus on the dying, as though dying is a thing that makes us great. If that’s really it, then we might as well skip the rest—we might as well just lie down and die.*²⁶

When re-read and re-told in this way, the martyr stories have the potential to teach us not to deny our power but to find our own “power-from-within.” For Krehbiel, this is what the examples of Jesus and the martyrs offer when valued beyond just their deaths.²⁷ When read as stories of real people facing religious or political persecution, the martyrs also have the potential to “remind us of our commonality with non-Mennonite others” who have faced similar traumatic attempts to erase or annihilate with a mix of courage and fear. “I’ve rarely heard them used for that purpose,” Krehbiel writes.²⁸

Conclusion

As we enter the next five hundred years of Anabaptism, perhaps it would be best to carry the *Martyrs Mirror* in one hand and *Tongue Screws and Testi-*

25 Margaret Loewen Reimer, ed., *Christians Courageous: Stories for Children from Church History* (Waterloo, ON: Mennonite Publishing House, 1988), 39.

26 Krehbiel, “Staying Alive,” 142.

27 Krehbiel, “Staying Alive,” 143–44.

28 Krehbiel, “Staying Alive,” 138–39. Cf. the discussion of Mennonite and Cree traumas in Elaine Enns, “Healing Trauma, Decolonizing Memory,” *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* 20 no. 2 (Fall 2019):14–24, <https://press.palni.org/ojs/index.php/vision/article/view/340>; and Samatar, *White Mosque* 187–89.

monies in the other in order to remind us of the double tellings necessary to convey the multiple dimensions of the martyrs' legacy. I am reminded of the contemporary Latin American liberation practice of remembering those who have been murdered as *¡Presente!*—as present in an ongoing way, enlivening the movement as part of the great “cloud of witnesses.” San Salvador Archbishop Óscar Romero, for instance, was murdered by right-wing government forces while leading Mass in 1980. During a worship service or gathering, people will “take attendance” of the dead, calling out the names of those who have been martyred and asserting their presence among those remaining resisters, gathered in solidarity: “Óscar Romero?” “*¡Presente!*” Dorothee Soelle speaks of this practice of insisting on the enlivening presence of the dead, this refusal to forget those who have been violently silenced and killed, as a form of resurrection.²⁹ May we also be so enlivened in our remembrance of these tragic and triumphant forebears of our faith.

About the author

Susanne Guenther Loewen recently completed her time as co-pastor of Nutana Park Mennonite Church. She teaches peace studies at St. Thomas More College at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon (Treaty 6 Territory and Homeland of the Métis).

²⁹ Dorothee Sölle, *The Window of Vulnerability: A Political Spirituality*, translated by Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 34; Dorothee Sölle, *Theology for Skeptics: Reflections on God*, translated by Joyce L. Irwin (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 106.