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has been accepted towards fulfillment
of the requirements for the

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degree in

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WATER FOR A BARREN LAND:
WORSHIP MUSIC AMONG THE MENNONITES OF EAST FREEMAN, SOUTH
DAKOTA

By

Stephanie Krehbiel

A THESIS

Submitted to
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ABSTRACT

WATER FOR A BARREN LAND: WORSHIP MUSIC AMONG THE MENNONITES OF EAST FREEMAN, SOUTH DAKOTA

By

Stephanie Krehbiel

The Mennonite churches of Salem and Salem-Zion, located in the rural area east of Freeman, South Dakota, are well established in the midwestern Mennonite world as keepers of a strong worship music tradition. As descendents of a separatist faith, how have Mennonites of East Freeman brought that tradition to bear on changes in their increasingly modern and autonomous lives? What threats do they face, and how do they bring their musically enriched faith to bear on these threats?

This thesis addresses several issues in rural Mennonite life, examined within the specific context of East Freeman. Included are discussions of contemporary Christian music in a community accustomed to singing hymns, the dual challenges of bad weather and factory farming for family farmers, and how the education of young people factors into the survival of Mennonites. The main source of data for this work is ethnographic research, including interviews and participant-observation, supplemented by secondary sources used to contextualize data within broader ethnographic questions.

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To the people of the Salem and Salem-Zion Mennonite Churches
and to my grandmother, Letha Krehbiel.

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Introduction

I first came to Freeman, South Dakota in the summer of 1998 to play the flute in the wedding of two college friends, William Ortman and Sherilyn Graber. It was the summer after my college graduation; I was soon off to Michigan for a master's in flute performance, and the wedding was the last of that season's road trips for me.

The town of Freeman, with a population of approximately 1,300 and located about forty-five minutes southwest of Sioux Falls, barely left an impression on me during that first visit. What did make an impact was Freeman as a Mennonite institution, a cultural outpost where lauded old traditions like four-part singing and heavy German food seemed destined to ever flourish, and Mennonite blood lines ran as thick as tree trunks. I had always been intimidated by the whole idea of Freeman—it is well known throughout the Mennonite Midwest for its great choirs and the talented musicians it has produced, many of whom have left the town for successful musical careers. I was no less intimidated to get up and play the flute in front of these people, even for a wedding. I knew from experience how ably Mennonite musicians could critique one another, having come from a family of able Mennonite critics myself.

I was content not to learn what, if anything, was whispered about my playing for this formidable congregation, but my interest in Freeman was piqued. Two years later, emboldened by a master's degree and a desire to play again with Sherilyn, my unrivaled accompanist from college, I went to Freeman to perform a recital with her. At the time, I was preparing to enter a master's program in ethnomusicology and had decided to study the Mennonites, although I didn't know yet which ones, or where I would go to do this.

We joked that perhaps I should come to Freeman to do my research, and a year later, I did.

I came to Freeman as an outsider, but I also came as an insider in the sense that I shared with my consultants a common heritage and background in the Mennonite faith. The fact that I was Mennonite meant that I started from a very different drawing board than a non-Mennonite doing research on the same group would, and I have endeavored to show the reader my perspective in hopes of maximum ethnographic honesty. Mellonee Burnim, as an African-American ethnomusicologist and gospel musician studying gospel music in Black churches, has written about the impact of her insider status on her research: “Ethnic identity was, unquestionably a vital component of the fieldwork equation...It was most apparent in the subtle ways individuals offered assistance, support, or sought alliance.”¹ I had a similar experience. For my consultants, my researcher status existed alongside the no less important designations of fellow Mennonite and fellow musician.

This thesis is not only about my Freeman consultants. It is, more generally, about being part of an ethnoreligious group that has made the gospel charge “to be in the world but not of it” a primary part of its collective identity. I leave the question of whether Mennonites fulfill this charge, or even should, to other kinds of scholars—my concern is how this and related identity issues unfold in the situations I discuss. While Freeman Mennonites are at the forefront of my discussion, and the scholars I cite add further insight, my own Mennonite life has been a resource as well.

¹ Mellonee Burnim. “Culture Bearer and Tradition Bearer: An Ethnomusicologist’s Research on Gospel Music.” *Ethnomusicology* 29, no. 3 (1985): 432-47.

Anyone who has read or written about Mennonites has probably encountered dialogue about Mennonite identity—perhaps more often than he or she would like. Mennonites are famously (amongst themselves, anyway) preoccupied with, as humorists Craig Haas and Steve Nolt would say, “identifying an identifiable identity.” In a spoof encyclopedia article, they gave some indication of the excessive and sometimes fruitless attention the subject receives:

Much of the attention to the subject of Mennonite identity has come from increased notice among Mennonite constituent groups that less of what constitutes and defines the core Mennonite image remains conditionally intact. In the rapidly changing and mobile world in which western society finds itself as only one part, individual and group identity becomes all the more critical. The need for a clearer Mennonite identity was outlined in Esther Tschetter’s 1977 thesis, “Identity, Ideology, and Ideograms, and Idumea in Mennonite Perspective.” Tschetter identifies identity as foundational to any coherent and cognitive sense of self which may be gained and maintained through committed peoplehood. Contrasting false and true identity, Tschetter set the tone of future Mennonite identity studies, by suggesting that true identity (rather than false) was the worthwhile focus of any future identity investigation.²

Why do Mennonites talk about identity so much, and why should anyone else care? One answer to the first question, perhaps, is that Mennonites, as a traditionally nonconformist group, experience “otherness,” and want to make sense of it. In addition, they are a diasporic group with a history of persecution, displacement, and migration—a history with which many are in active relationship. An answer to the second question, I would argue, is contained in Haas and Nolt’s mock article, in which they assert with maximum verbosity that many of the elements that once defined Mennonites are less apparent than they used to be. In this, Mennonites are not alone; they are among many groups, religious and otherwise, who have faced the cultural challenges of urbanization

² Craig Haas and Steve Nolt, *The Mennonite Starter Kit*. Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1993. p 29.

and increased mobility. And while there has not been a major, international migration of Mennonite peoples for decades, a subtler migration has occurred within North American Mennonite groups, a migration away from the rural areas where they once lived to cities. The majority of American Mennonites today are urban dwellers.³ Thus, there is very real fear in small, rural communities such as Freeman of losing so many people that the communities die. This isn't just a Mennonite fear, obviously—it's prevalent in small towns all over the United States. But for Mennonites, the consequence has been a renewed inquiry into what defines them, and whether these things can survive the changes that are coming.

This work examines the issues described above through the lens of a specific location and community. Chapter 1 examines the pertinence of Mennonite identity and survival questions to an area of ongoing conflict in the community, the use of “praise music,” or contemporary Christian worship music, in church services. The second chapter uses voices and stories from the Freeman community to anchor broader discussion of how Mennonites create traditions and use major themes from their history to interpret their present. In the third chapter, I discuss one very pressing issue of the present for Freeman farmers—the onslaught of large-scale and factory farming on their livelihoods, and how they use Mennonite faith and practice to respond to the challenge. Chapter 4 focuses on the younger generation of community members, the role that music is taking in their lives, and what they are doing to ensure the community's future.

³ A good source of statistics on Mennonite movements and attitudes, albeit slightly dated, is *The Mennonite Mosaic: Identity and Modernization*, by J. Howard Kauffman, Leo Driedger, and Donald Kraybill (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1991).

Some of the terms and phrases that I use in this work should be clarified. The town of Freeman itself is not the focus of my study; rather, I focus on what is known to residents of the area as “East Freeman.” East Freeman is not a town or an official designation, but rather the local way of referring to the rural area east of the town of Freeman. Beyond its locational reference, it connotes the Swiss Mennonite community, now mostly contained within the two churches of Salem Mennonite and Salem-Zion Mennonite. The Freeman area is also home to Mennonites of Low German origin, also known as Russian Mennonites. (I discuss the difficulties of labeling different groups of Mennonites in Chapter 2.) Also present in and around Freeman are Hutterites, Mennonites who trace their roots to the Hutterites, a separatist Anabaptist group that still lives in communal colonies, some of which are in the area. These groups are not part of my study. However, one shouldn’t assume that the boundaries between these Freeman groups are impermeable. Inter-marriage and personal preference has brought Mennonites from one group to the church of another. Several of my consultants are of non-Swiss origin. When I came to Freeman, I let people know that I was interested in the Salem and Salem-Zion churches and simply worked from there, without regard to the ethnicity of my consultants. Consequently, when I use “East Freeman community” as an encompassing term, I am referring mainly to the members of these congregations.

The Salem and Salem-Zion churches are on the same rural road (neither within Freeman city limits), removed from each other by only a few miles. Because of their close proximity and close historical relationship—they were, at one time, a single church—they are referred to in the community as the “North Church” (Salem-Zion), and the “South Church” (Salem). I use these names and the full names of the churches

interchangeably throughout the thesis. Given the common roots and substantial intermarriage between the congregations, there is ample reason, for the purposes of clarity, to think of them as a single community. Both are moderately sized congregations with a few hundred members between them. Because their Sunday morning services meet at two different times, I attended both churches during my time in Freeman, and formed relationships with people from both congregations. Seventeen of them met with me outside of church for interviews.

Larger groups names need clarification as well, and some brief historical background will help here. The term “Anabaptist,” meaning “re-baptized,” refers to the splinter group that instigated what is sometimes called the “Radical Reformation,” suggesting reforms that went beyond Martin Luther’s in their opposition to established Catholic doctrine. From their sixteenth-century beginnings, the Anabaptists formed various groups of adherents, of which the Mennonites are one. Other groups include the Amish, the Church of the Brethren, the Mennonite Brethren, the Brethren in Christ, and the Hutterites. Lifestyle-wise, there is extreme variance between and even within these groups, but all acknowledge Anabaptism as their common reference point. Core Anabaptist values include adult baptism (or “believer’s baptism”), pacifism, and simplicity of lifestyle.⁴ When addressing history and identity issues in this text, I use the term “Anabaptist” when I find it more accurate than the term “Mennonite.”

Though this is an ethnomusicology thesis, much is in it that does not pertain directly to music. This is mainly because the bulk of my fieldwork was done during the

⁴ A relatively brief, concise history of Anabaptist movements can be found in the first chapter of Donald Kraybill’s book, *The Riddle of Amish Culture* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1989). For a lengthier and less objective analysis, see *The Story of the Mennonites*, by C. Henry Smith (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1981).

summer, when few of the community's large musical events are scheduled. My discussion of non-musical issues, I hope, helps bring perspective to the musical ones.

Chapter 1: A Few Ways to be a Mennonite: Contemporary Christian Music in a Community of Hymns

Of the praise music that I have been familiar with ... [it] tends to draw attention to the singer rather than to the one to whom you are supposed to be singing in a worship setting. And I, as a pastor, sense that that in my way of evaluating worship, is not the direction I should be leading my people and pointing my people, and that singing as well as scripture or prayer or preaching, ought to be pointing us to God and to our creator, and music can be a part of that ... It should focus and direct our thoughts, our attention, our aspirations our praise toward—toward our God, toward Christ. And the expression of God. Praise music, generically, is weak in doing that. I won't say it never does that. But it's more focused on "my feelings" and "I want," and "I like," and "I"—you find that personal pronoun in a lot of chorus music, or praise music, very frequently. And, again, it's an acculturation of Christianity is what it is, my opinion.

—Bob Engbrecht, Pastor, Salem Zion Mennonite Church

Sometimes you're just overwhelmed with love for your dad. And he maybe doesn't even, haven't done anything, but you want to tell him—you love him, just because, you know, and for me, that's somewhat the same in worship. God might not have done specifically that I'm—you know, like this huge thing in my life right at this moment, but sometimes you're just overwhelmed—and you just want to tell him you love him. And that you worship him. And that, you know, he's worthy ... somehow you just want to—to me it's kind of a feeling of just crawling up into your dad's lap. And just ... hugging him and telling him you love him and I think for me, contemporary worship allows me to do that more so with God. Where you can just kind of, just be yourself, and open yourself up to God ... that's more of a personal thing, at least it is for me, and I think that's kind of ... how I would describe that.

—Stacey Kramer, Assistant Pastor, Salem Mennonite Church

I interviewed Bob Engbrecht at Will and Sherilyn's kitchen table, shortly before he departed for a trip. He had generously worked me in, despite last-minute preparations that included bringing a gravely injured puppy from his kennel to the Ortman farm, to be cared for while he was gone. Having deposited the puppy with Gwen and her daughter, Kelsey, he came over to talk with me. As I set up my tape recorder, he told me about the dogs in his kennel, and how caring for them helped him relax. This particular puppy was accidentally struck in the head by a falling object and, despite its seizures and impaired sense of balance, was showing an implacable will to live.

Bob's apparent concern and sense of responsibility for this little dog belied what I discovered, in the interview that followed, to be a generous and deliberate nature. I had heard him preach the Sunday before, and when I told him how much I enjoyed his sermon (a truthful compliment), he smiled and said, "Oh thank you, bless your heart." Bob's preaching is well-received at Salem-Zion; in a community where criticism is quick to fly off disapproving tongues (a common affliction of small towns, sometimes overemphasized by those who like to criticize them), I heard nothing but praise for his sermons. I'd also heard numerous compliments on his gift for hymn-selection, the most striking coming from a teenage girl who spoke of how powerful the hymn had been after a sermon in which Bob spoke about caring for his wife, who has early-onset Alzheimer's.

Bob, who has served at Salem-Zion for eleven years, made sure I knew he wasn't a musician: "If you're looking for somebody who knows a lot about music, you're interviewing the wrong person," he said. He hasn't had much musical training, and selects hymns based completely on their texts and the relevance of those texts to the theme of the service. When the subject of contemporary Christian music came up, he explained the shortcomings that he saw, based on the textual message he believes this music delivers.

Bob's perspective on this music was familiar to me, not only from my contact with other Freeman consultants, but also from Mennonites I've spoken with at other churches I have visited or attended. My search for another point of view led me to Stacey Kramer, the recently hired assistant pastor at Salem. Stacey, whose primary responsibilities rest with youth ministry, has been actively engaged in contemporary worship since her college years, when she attended a Mennonite Brethren church and

Mennonite Brethren college, majoring in Christian ministry with an emphasis in youth ministry.¹ She was twenty-four at the time of our conversation, and was very direct with me about the extent to which she has struggled to readjust to life in her home town. “It’s been really difficult,” she said. “There’s not a lot of young people and not a lot of that kind of thing to relate to, so it’s been a rough road.” Stacey’s efforts to bring contemporary worship to Salem have not been entirely welcomed, and she knows this from the grapevine: “I personally don’t hear it very much. I hear it, like, through this person and this person who talked to this person.” Her quotation at the chapter’s opening was a response to a question I posed: if she could say whatever she wanted to a person who didn’t understand her approach to worship, to help them understand it, what would she say?

Bob and Stacey are simple to dichotomize. I might easily construct this argument: Bob, being male, older, and experienced in ministry, represents a voice of power. His desire to de-emphasize the individual comes from the voice of Mennonite history, a history in which communal ideals have been a tool in the maintenance of patriarchy. Stacey, being young, female, and new to her job, is disempowered and disadvantaged, bearing the legacy of those individuals—women especially—who have been silenced, unable to express themselves in the sphere of worship. She is a lone voice fighting for her right to approach God on her own terms, rather than through the filter of a community in which she has little power.

And just as easily, I might argue this: Stacey, through her promotion of a music and worship style that is a popular and influential part of American Christianity, is asking

¹ Mennonite Brethren have widely accepted contemporary worship styles.

people to turn their backs on a rich history of communal life in service of God, a history that has enabled them to resist the consumerist call of American culture. She wants them to make their own emotions their guide in worship, in defiance of their heritage. Bob, on the other hand, encourages his church to ignore that same powerful call. He represents an Anabaptist ideal, that of the faithful adhering to their beliefs in the face of overwhelming pressure to place their loyalties elsewhere.

I don't believe either of these models can do justice to the situation as it truly stands. For one thing, as individuals, neither Bob nor Stacy fits into these reductionist arguments, and neither deserves the blame implicit in them. Also, I seriously doubt that any of my Freeman consultants would find these arguments illustrative of the truth as they see it. They might believe, as I do, that in these separate scenarios are fragments of truth, not about Bob and Stacy necessarily, but about their community. But each of these models requires a situation far simpler than the actual one. Rather than trying to make the case for one model or the other, I'd argue that the introduction of contemporary Christian worship and music in the East Freeman community, simply put, has made people think—about the nature of Mennonite identity and faith, the purpose of their worship, and their relationship to the non-Mennonite, secular world. The power struggles inherent in this process have been keenly felt by members of the community, and it is frequently unclear who is exercising power over whom, even when the use and abuse of power is clearly at issue.

The main purpose of this chapter is to gauge the impact of a certain kind of congregational singing, one in which hymnals generally stay unused in the pews, on a community very attached to the contents of the hymnal. One could easily write on what

this music should be called; one could also take the term “contemporary Christian music” as a starting point for discussion of what music belongs in that category. I won’t pursue either of these avenues in this chapter; other writers have admirably tackled the task of defining and categorizing this music.² Because people in East Freeman tend to use the phrase “praise music,” I use it as well. Other variants that I have heard include “chorus music,” “contemporary worship music,” and “praise and worship music.” Generally speaking, this is music that uses non-liturgical instruments, such as guitars, drums, bass, and electronic keyboard. There tends to be less written harmony than in hymns, although those comfortable with the genre add harmonies of their own.

In East Freeman, there is a larger conflict behind the different opinions about what kinds of music should be sung in church. Time and time again, I have seen Mennonites, in Freeman and elsewhere, attempt to resolve friction over congregational singing by suggesting that congregants learn to be tolerant of each other. They imply that the purpose of all worship music is essentially the same, and that the disputes that arise are a result of petty preferences that can be resolved by appealing to people’s higher natures. Yet the same conflicts resurface. While close-mindedness, inflexibility, and intolerance are clearly present and responsible for struggles in the world of Mennonite church music, I would argue that an aesthetic musical preference is often an important manifestation of a theological and/or spiritual outlook. Congregational singing is, after all, a means through which to transfer spiritual values. What looks outwardly like a

² Brian Wren has a nice discussion of worship music definitions in Chapter 4 of his book *Praying Twice: The Music and Words of Congregational Song* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000). His perspective is definitely that of a more hymn-preferring church musician, but he is even-handed and offers some insight into how someone with decades of church music experience tackles the issue of what to call different kinds of music.

conflict over trivialities is often a more fundamental disagreement over what is spiritually important. Among my consultants in the Salem and Salem-Zion churches, a major issue at the forefront of the contemporary worship debate is this: what should be most emphasized in our worship, the individual or the community? The remainder of this chapter will explore the various ways in which this conflict has surfaced, and how the members of these churches are handling it.

The Mennonite Makeover

To understand the reception of contemporary Christian music as a worship tool in individual Mennonite congregations, it helps to understand the larger institutional context under which it has entered the Mennonite scene. Salem and Salem-Zion are both part of the Mennonite Church U.S.A., the Mennonite denomination composed of two recently merged conferences, the General Conference (formed by Mennonite immigrants from Russia), and the Mennonite Church (formed by Swiss Mennonites). Until their migrations to North America, Anabaptists resisted the concept of an overarching church bureaucracy, and some Anabaptist groups, most notably the Amish, function to this day without any recognized denominational structure. However, the majority of American Mennonites, like their neighbors of other Protestant denominations, identify themselves as members of “the conference.” As such, the growing pains of this young institution are keenly felt by many of its members. Many of these growing pains have to do with the young denomination’s struggles to legitimize itself to its diverse membership, contending with many the many different conceptions of Mennonite identity that come from this

membership—while at the same time appealing to outsiders with the hope of church growth.

In the introduction of *Nationalists, Cosmopolitans, and Popular Music in Zimbabwe*, Thomas Turino describes the inherent difficulties in “nationalism and cultural reformism.” A nation, according to Turino, must maintain a careful balance between global outreach and national pride in order to thrive (or to survive).³ Any overextension in one direction, at the expense of the other, can result in problems. If the nation concentrates too hard on securing its place in the global sphere, it may do so at the expense of local culture and distinctiveness. If, however, it errs in the other direction, fostering solely the resources within its own borders, it can turn in on itself, nurturing rivalries amongst its different peoples and undermining its strength as a unit.

Turino is speaking of nations, but his model is broad enough to apply to many organized groups of people, religious denominations included. The Mennonite Church U.S.A., for instance, identifies as an evangelical denomination, to the extent that the introductory statement on its website says this: “God is calling us to be a ‘missional church’ with a witness to be shared across the street and around the world.”⁴ This evangelical or “missional” focus has brought the historically very congregation-oriented faith into closer quarters with mainstream Protestant denominations. The Mennonite Church U.S.A., as an institution, wants and needs to show that it is relevant to modern life. Those who have leadership and public relations roles in the church are well aware of the Mennonites’ reputation for being backward, pre-technological, and generally out of

³ Thomas Turino. *Nationalists, Cosmopolitans, and Popular Music in Zimbabwe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 15.

⁴ www.mennonitechurchusa.org.

step with the status quo, and, like the hypothetical Turino nation, they are walking a high wire. They have to rid themselves of this reputation—they can't have potential members thinking that Mennonites are separatists,⁵ cultists, or in any way strange. At the same time, they do want people to know that Mennonites have something unique to offer, that being a Mennonite is different from being a Presbyterian, a Methodist, or a Lutheran.

This road is not a smooth one. As a young Mennonite coming of age amidst major changes in the denomination's outlook and structure, I know many people who feel that their dearest Anabaptist values are being compromised to make the Mennonite faith a better "sell." American culture, as it is today, presents some major challenges to these values, challenges that aren't particularly marketable.⁶ For example, the pacifist doctrine, whose primacy to Mennonite identity remains strong, is as unpopular with the American government as it has ever been. As I write this, my e-mail inbox is full of messages about a Canadian Mennonite recently denied entry into the United States and questioned by the F.B.I. for his involvement in a Christian Peacemaker Teams delegation to Iraq.⁷ Pacifism, clearly, requires a deliberate and sometimes risky witness in the current political climate. The simple lifestyle that many Mennonites consider vital to the faith is also a tricky sell amidst the noise of the free market.

⁵ I should emphasize that for the moment, I am referring to Mennonites of the Mennonite Church U.S.A. Some smaller Mennonite groups, such as the Old Colony and Old Order Mennonites, do remain literal separatists.

⁶ On an institutional level, I perceive a thinly veiled lack of confidence in the viability of the Mennonite faith for a wider audience.

⁷ The Christian Peacemaker Teams is a Chicago-based organization, sponsored by the Mennonites, the Church of the Brethren, and the Society of Friends (Quakers). It sends delegations of non-violent resisters to warring areas, and has a permanent presence in such locations as Colombia and the occupied West Bank.

Thus, Turino's model encapsulates a central problem in the Mennonite Church U.S.A.—how to freshen up the Mennonite complexion—give it a makeover if you will—without painting it to look like something it's not, or something it can't be. Many, if not most, of the internal debates that have surfaced in the decade leading up to the denominational merger and the time since⁸ have risen from differences over how, why and even if this makeover needs to be done. Will changing our face make us disingenuous? Or are the cosmetic alterations needed merely to reflect deeper changes that have already occurred? Will the makeover make us so much like the faces around us that no one can pick us out of a crowd anymore? Will changes that start out as cosmetic eventually sink in to the point that there's no *reason* to pick us out of the crowd? And perhaps the most critical question: will this make us more or less likely to survive? Never before have Mennonites had to ask these questions on such a large-scale, institutional level—the Mennonite Church U.S.A. is the largest Mennonite denomination in the world and the largest organization of churches in the history of the faith.

Not only that, but Mennonites aren't, historically speaking, used to wearing much makeup, especially not as an institution. Makeup is, after all, put on to present an image of ourselves to the world around us, something Mennonites have tended to avoid, at least in principle. Mennonite poet and essayist Julia Kasdorf writes, "Until the traditional Anabaptist principles of nonresistance and community led some Mennonite people to become engaged with the anti-war and civil rights movements of the 1960s, Mennonites considered silence to be an appropriate attitude toward the wider world and a necessary

⁸ The merger was finalized in January 2002.

means of survival in it.”⁹ Silence has also been, Kasdorf asserts, a means for Mennonites to peacefully co-exist with each other. This includes people co-existing within one church, as well as churches co-existing under the label “Mennonite.” The Mennonite Church U.S.A. has effectively forced all these quiet co-existers to cooperate in the venture of putting a face together to show the outside world. The result, predictably, has been much airing of dirty laundry.

To write about all this dirty laundry could easily lead to a book, with the longest chapter most likely focusing on a persistent and divisive dispute over homosexuality. A less publicly contentious issue that has also experienced a surge of debate since the merger, however, is the matter of what should be sung in church, and what kinds of music should be promoted for worship by the conference. Now that American Mennonites have a denomination that is explicit in its desire to missionize and grow, what they sing is not only for themselves—it’s also for the public, the vast pool of potential new Mennonites. The crowd-drawing success that other denominations have had with contemporary Christian music is difficult to ignore when church growth is a stated goal. Music is an undeniable feature of the newly made-up face.

Turino’s model illuminates the workings of a large structure, the Mennonite Church U.S.A., and gives an idea of the survival issues behind the musical issues. Music is created, however, by individuals with agency, people like Bob and Stacey and their parishoners. By looking at these agents—their motivations, their skills, their life experiences—we come closer to understanding how they both feed into and are fed by the structure under which they live and work.

⁹ Julia Kasdorf. “Writing like a Mennonite.” in *The Body and the Book*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 167.

A Few Ways to be a Mennonite

What accounts for the great differences in how Bob and Stacey approach worship music? There are many responses to that, but a major one, I believe, can be found in a common Anabaptist approach to spirituality. Historically, being an Anabaptist has meant being a member of a community. Individual interests are nearly always subsumed by those of the group, at least in theory, and personal modesty is paramount. The Amish call this *Gelassenheit*, or surrender. Donald Kraybill describes the concept in *The Riddle of Amish Culture*:

Although *Gelassenheit* seems repressive to Moderns, it is a redemptive paradox for the Amish. They believe that the followers of Christ and the martyrs of old were called to lose their lives in order to save them. ...The Amish believe that people who deny self and submit to divine precepts bring honor and glory to God. Members who yield to their neighbors are ultimately revering God. The person who forgoes personal advancement for the sake of family and community makes a redemptive sacrifice that transforms the church into the body of Christ. *Gelassenheit* is a social process that recycles individual energy for community purposes. ...This deep conviction to yield self-interest for the sake of the community provides a powerful resource of cultural capital.¹⁰

Though Kraybill is focused on a community that practices a more radical version of these principles than mainstream Mennonites, his description, I think, captures some of the reasoning behind Bob's epigraph quote. Mainstream Mennonites rarely use the word *Gelassenheit*, but in many ways they stand on the same spiritual feet as the Amish. The community paves a Mennonite's road to God. Serving the community is equivalent to serving God. And contemporary Christian music, as Bob pointed out, is often oriented toward the individual's experience. He was not the only consultant of mine to express

¹⁰ Kraybill, 32.

distaste or, at the very least, distrust in the “I” and “me” language of praise music; several people I spoke with made similar comments. “I guess some of it, the biggest issue that I have is that it’s supposed to be about me, as I’m singing it, it’s not about God. You know, what I’m feeling, what I’m doing, you know, give me this, or I feel this,” said Jim Graber, a Salem member.

To many people in Freeman, praise music represents Christianity in its most American form—most individualistic, most commercial, and most status quo. Bob referred to this when he called it an “acculturation of Christianity.” Similarly, Ellen Ortman commented, “Yeah, it is more entertaining. But I think it’s also more me-centered. We’re so terribly, you know, self-centered nowadays, in this country. And I think those songs reflect that.” A worship style that refers to or reminds people of the dominant economic and cultural forces in American culture is very problematic to Mennonite worshippers who self-consciously locate their faith in a place beyond these forces.

But those who enjoy praise music point to its capacity to nourish the individual faith experience in a way that hymn singing, according to them, does not. The same quality in this music that some worshippers object to—the recurring personal pronouns, the references to one’s own faith—is for others the quality that draws them in and makes their worship experience real. In a Mennonite context, where community values are given an especially high premium, some argue that there is a need for more individual nurturance, especially towards young people.

Stacey is probably the strongest advocate for contemporary music and worship at Salem, perhaps in the entire East Freeman community. With the help of Kaye Waltner, a

well-respected public school music teacher and keyboardist (the only musician I met who seemed to have a significant personal investment in both praise music and hymn singing), Stacey has begun a “praise band” of teenagers at Salem that plays approximately once a month. On these Sundays, the band plays during the normal prelude time (9:00—9:30 am) and does several songs with the congregation during the service.¹¹ The quotation at the chapter’s head reveals one of the roots of Stacey’s frustration with traditional Mennonite worship: it alienates her from God, or at the very least, keeps her at a frustrating distance.

Reasons Stacey gave for the community’s resistance to contemporary worship were a fear of change and a lack of exposure to new ideas, explaining:

I think they’re scared to do anything different. I think it’s something that they’ve always known, it’s how it’s always been, is church is serious, this is how you do things, this is how it is, and for most people in the church, they’ve never been anywhere else, I mean, they haven’t gone away and moved somewhere and then come back, to have those different experiences, because the people who even have kids and stuff, who move away, who maybe their kids go to a more contemporary church, some of them come back, and they’re like, “You know, this is the way they do it [at a contemporary church], and we really like it.”

If fear is indeed involved, is this all it is? A fear of change, rooted in provincialism? I don’t presume to know if the statement above is an accurate representation of the East Freeman community, although in my personal experiences there, I have certainly encountered more thoughtful worldliness than mindless provincialism. Stacey’s other major idea about why people don’t appreciate contemporary music is that they are afraid to express emotions. In this view, she is not alone; hymn-lovers and proponents of praise

¹¹ Having contemporary music before services is a common way of dealing with opposition to this music among congregants. Those who are uninterested in hearing it can wait in the church narthex (lobby) until it is over and enter the sanctuary when the service begins. Salem-Zion also utilized this method about a decade ago during their contemporary Christian experiment.

music alike agree that Mennonites have “issues” with emotions. “We’re very afraid of emotions in our—in this church, just to keep it on a congregational level, we don’t know how to deal with our emotions. And we don’t know how to articulate emotions, we don’t know how to express emotions,” said Stacey’s colleague Roy Kaufman, the lead pastor at Salem. In *Singing, A Mennonite Voice*, Marlene Kropf and Kenneth Nafziger make a similar claim on a broader scale: “By culture, Mennonites are a reserved, unexpressive people. We are reluctant to reveal deep feelings. We would rather show our love for others by building barns or feeding the hungry.”¹² Many Mennonite households enforce the idea that emotional display is self-indulgent, weak, or unseemly. Consequently, tearful displays are not popular in most churches, nor are unbridled expressions of joy. The aversion to bringing excess attention to one’s self keeps nearly everyone well behaved and quiet in the pews. (Even at funerals, I’m always struck by the stoic lack of tears.) Because of this, the overtly emotional *modus operandi* of contemporary worship, for many Mennonites, is as jarring as fingernails on a blackboard.

It would be brazenly wrong, however, to suggest that Mennonites do not feel anything strongly during their worship, or during the singing of hymns. It’s a testimony to the power of their experiences that almost no one I spoke with in Freeman, despite their generally restrained approach to emotional display, was able to speak to me dispassionately about how they felt while singing in church, uncomfortable though they often were with my (admittedly sometimes artless) questions. In a conversation with Larry Eisenbeis, a Salem-Zion member who spent years farming in Brazil and returned to the Freeman community (also a keen observer of the Freeman musical life and a Freeman

¹² Marlene Kropf and Kenneth Nafziger. *Singing: A Mennonite Voice*. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001), 67.

history buff), we drifted to the subject of the singing at Salem-Zion, and he became downright choked-up. “I think our singing is ... I just kind of like it. I don’t know if you’ve been here when Ken does the organ, and he konks out on a verse [meaning he stops playing to let the congregation sing *a capella*], and you have that—beautiful sound ...” Larry couldn’t go on for a moment, so powerful was his immediate affective response at the thought of his congregation singing alone and in four parts.

Resistance to praise music can often be traced to a dislike of the culture from which it comes (or the culture from which people perceive it coming—I can’t make claims for the origins of every song that East Freemanites would put in this category). This culture, the aggressively evangelical contemporary Christian music industry, has come to exist almost as a denomination of its own, a community that borrows from established denominations but is not bound by them, and is unapologetically trend-conscious. William Romanowski writes, “The most salient feature in the evolution of the CCM [contemporary Christian music] industry was the continual coalescing of evangelical commitments and beliefs with other social and cultural trends in America, especially those that animated the mainstream entertainment industry.”¹³ This mode of “evolution” is one of the aspects of contemporary Christian music that seemed most objectionable to some of my consultants; a number of them remarked on the extraordinarily short shelf life of contemporary worship songs, contrasting them with hymns that had endured for centuries as evidence of their lack of intrinsic worth. Contemporary worship music’s link to popular entertainment, particularly for Freeman community members with a strong investment and education in art music, is part of why

¹³ William Romanowski. “Roll Over Beethoven, Tell Martin Luther the News: Evangelicals and Rock Music.” *Journal of American Culture*. 15, no. 3 (Fall 1992): 80.

many people believe it doesn't belong in church. "I will not use 'Jesus jingles,' as people call them. ... I'm very fussy about that," said Mavis Ortman, the choir director at Salem-Zion. She continued:

We've got to do the best, I mean, the best quality music in our worship services. ... I mean that's where I'm coming from. And, and one thing that really strikes me is the music director in Henderson, Nebraska [a Mennonite enclave], he's been the music director there most of his life, and he also is a tenor soloist, often the brides will ask him to sing at their weddings in the Henderson church. And they'll come to him with—the *Young and the Restless* theme, you know what I'm talking about, soap opera things, you know, and he said, he tells them he will not sing it at their wedding. He says, that's kind of like you would get your mother to get you a gunny sack for a bridal dress. You know, I think that's a real good image. I will sing it at your reception, but I will not sing it at your wedding ceremony. I think that's a very good analogy. You want to do the best in church.

Nobody (that I am aware of) in East Freeman is asking for soap opera themes to be sung during worship services but Mavis made it clear that she sees a connection between the *Young and the Restless* "gunny sack" and other worship music that borrows from mainstream, commercial sources.

An evangelical argument, of course, might be that mainstream entertainment styles and marketing schemes constitute not a cheapening of the worship experience but rather a means to an end, the end being the "salvation" of as many people as possible. Romanowski writes of the contemporary Christian music industry, "The success of evangelism was calculated by the number of souls that were saved; 'souls' were consumers, as measured by record sales, airplay, and concert tickets."¹⁴ Stacey, though she isn't trying to sell records, recognizes that contemporary music may have some recruiting potential:

People need to know the truth, I mean, there's a lot of people, even in Freeman, probably, who don't go to church, or who aren't, you know, aren't a part of any

¹⁴ Ibid., 81.

congregation or anything like that, but how are we reaching out to them.¹⁵ ... I think it can [contemporary music can attract worshippers], especially for the unchurched ... there's big churches in bigger cities and stuff, who do use more of the contemporary worship, um, to help draw people in, because that's—music is something that those people can relate to.

During my time in East Freeman, I did not speak with anyone who used evangelical language to the extent that Stacey did. This doesn't mean that Stacey is isolated in her beliefs; she probably isn't, for Roy commented that many people in his congregation now listen to Christian radio stations, where evangelical language is common. It is a big leap, however, from listening to other people talk about “saving souls,” to enthusiastically talking about it oneself. My impression was that in doing the latter, Stacey was still among a definite minority in East Freeman.

Why is that? Regardless of their beliefs, many of the people Stacey is now trying to minister to in the South Church most likely did not grow up with evangelical language in their homes. One of paradoxes of the Mennonite people is that while Mennonite missions have made it a truly international faith—with denominations in Central Africa that rival the North American ones for size—a large number of Mennonites are still very ambivalent about the whole concept of “missionizing.” Evangelism is part of the Mennonite Church U.S.A. conference mission statements, but the language used to describe it tends to be neutral or vague enough to accommodate people with a wide range of goals.¹⁶ Some Mennonites today are more like Stacey, and interested in questions of salvation. Others, probably still in the majority in this country, prefer what is generally called “service” to proselytizing. The Mennonite Church U.S.A. abounds with

¹⁵ “The truth” is in reference to the Christian message.

¹⁶ See the conference website (www.mennonitechurchusa.org). The Third Way Café website also offers some typical “Mennospeak” (www.thirdwaycafe.org).

organizations that enable people to be public servants in the name of their faith; the Mennonite Central Committee and Mennonite Disaster Service are among them. Stacey's time at a Mennonite Brethren college has influenced her greatly. She explained to me that M.B.s, as they are called, are far more interested in mission work than Mennonites. Stacey would like to see the Mennonites become more like this: "I think we need to get away from just focusing on works [meaning service]," she said.

Given these things, it's very likely that a large amount of the resistance Stacey encounters to her praise music efforts comes from either discomfort or downright opposition (or some combination of the two) to her evangelical focus. However, the recent history of Salem is also a factor. Stacey is not the first person to introduce praise music to the congregation, and if her reception has been chilly, Salem's last encounter with praise music, discussed in the next section, may explain part of her struggle.

Where the Power Lies: Praise Music, Coercion and What Young People Want

A central problem for advocates of praise music in Mennonite circles has been that many congregants, for various reasons, associate the music with situations in which they have felt coerced. Gage Averill has argued that how we experience music has much to do with the social and political context in which it is presented to us—often this factor supercedes the actual content of the music in importance.¹⁷ On an anecdotal level, I've spoken with countless Mennonites who have had at least one experience with contemporary Christian music performances or services (both within and outside of Mennonite auspices) in which they were made to feel as though waving their arms and

¹⁷ Gage Averill. *A Day for the Hunter, a Day for the Prey: Popular Music and Power in Haiti*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

doing altar calls was the only path to acceptance—by both their peers and their higher power. Their inability to do these things, or discomfort when they did do them, made for an active dislike of any music that reminded them of the incident. I have had such experiences myself.

Similarly, the Salem church struggled with a time in which many felt their needs unmet and their personal boundaries disregarded in worship. In 1998, a newly hired pastor at Salem, in what might be called a severe miscalculation of his congregation's will, switched services almost entirely over to contemporary Christian music upon his arrival, and his departure, a year later, was accelerated by the widespread dissatisfaction that ensued from his music choices. Several congregants who enjoyed his style departed with him. Others who liked it have stayed and searched for more diplomatic ways of integrating praise music into the services.

Since this pastor left, worship music at Salem has been delicately handled by his replacement, Roy Kaufman. "It is a high-pressure part of my job," he told me. "I felt that from the—starting when I came here. I mean, it was just—I agonized, you know, hours over hymns, and what to choose, what to use for worship."

As an outsider coming in after the fact, all I know of this period in Salem's history is from hearsay. One member, Harriet Kaufman, gave me her perspective on what happened:

I guess maybe that where our Mennonite heritage comes in, you know, way back, isn't that what the Mennonite church is all about, four-part singing? Harmony, maybe *a capella* once in awhile? And then all of a sudden you get this complete other kind of music, and then bringing in singers, I guess that maybe didn't help either, we had a group of singers up there, and they just—seemed like they took over, and then, they just kind of whipped the music, and it was like, "Hey, we're up here now, and we're doing our thing, and you better like it," and, it just really turned off the people. And our minister was told, "hey, lighten up, we can't just

all of a sudden, you know, enjoy this kind of music, give it to us slow,” and he refused to back down, and he said, hey, that’s how he—that’s how he does his services, and, he could not work with a worship team, because he had to be in charge, and so he was there a year, and then he saw, well, maybe this is not the church for him, either, so he did move on.

She highlighted a number of vital issues. One is the perception that there is something essentially Mennonite about the practice of four-part singing. Mennonites haven’t always sung in four parts, and it’s difficult to say when the practice began, as different Anabaptist groups embraced this style of singing at different points in history. Nevertheless, Harriet’s comment is an indication of the extent to which four-part harmony has been naturalized into the faith, even to the point where it is considered “what the Mennonite church is all about.” The act of four-part singing is a feast of metaphors for many a communally minded Mennonite; while singing in unison provides a certain sense of togetherness, harmony paints a richer picture of community, according to Jim Graber, who also attends Salem: “There is something about that meshing [of different vocal parts] that is extremely powerful ... That you have different personalities, different people, different souls, but you can come together and blend, and work together, being similar and yet different.”

Harriet’s struggle with having a group of songleaders in front of the congregation also reveals something, although my limited information about what actually happened makes it difficult to know to what degree she was simply reacting to the demeanor of these specific songleaders. Whether their attitudes or the construct itself—putting musical control in the hands of a few—is in question, the underlying issue is where power is concentrated during music-making. Mennonites generally diffuse power as much as possible in their institutions, forming what often seem like endless committees to address

every facet of decision-making. There's an old joke that captures it well (here's the version I remember): "How many Mennonites does it take to screw in a light bulb? Twenty-three to appoint a planning committee, seven to decide how the light bulb will be screwed in, two to screw in the light bulb, and eight to organize the potluck afterwards." People who grew up with this basically democratic model like to sing in four parts, I believe, largely because the individual parts working in tandem provide a metaphor of the ideal functioning of an Anabaptist faith community. In four-part singing, there is some level of autonomy within one voice part, but at the same time, it is untenable by itself—just as the interests of one individual must be surrendered to the community, as in *Gelassenheit*. The metaphor works especially well when a congregation has experience and ability with the format, as many Mennonite congregations (including both North and South churches) do, and is less needful of leadership. A strong organist, or even a chorister, can guide a congregation through hymns without taking on a role that precludes each individual's ability to navigate the music.¹⁸ A team of songleaders, however, can draw boundaries between the leaders and the led, and this breaks down a living metaphor on which people have come to rely for spiritual sustenance.¹⁹

If this metaphor were to be challenged, it might be from the standpoint of young people, especially those eighteen and younger. Kaye Waltner, for instance, explained to

¹⁸ A chorister is a songleader who conducts the congregation through hymn-singing. The practice tends to be more common among congregations of the (former) Mennonite Church denomination and less common among the (formerly) General Conference Mennonites, the category into which Salem and Salem-Zion fall.

¹⁹ After reading a draft of this chapter, Roy Kaufman noted another reason for the dislike of praise music. When used to the exclusion of more traditional musical practices, praise music curtails the participation of choir directors and organists in services. According to Roy, these individuals were particularly resistant to the implementation of the contemporary worship style during the aforementioned period in Salem's history.

me how beneficial the praise music has been for the young people at Salem, allowing them to express themselves and be involved in church to greater extent than is possible without contemporary worship. Of their praise band, Stacey said, “The kids love it, I think ... when the kids go to church, it’s like, oh, ho-hum, we have to go to church because our parents are making us, and stuff like that. But when they showed up for practice, they were all smiles and laughing and I think they had a really good time. It was the first time I had seen them excited to be involved with church.” It’s likely that Stacey’s and Kaye’s praise band is the first opportunity many of Salem’s teenagers have had to participate in church services beyond choir and hymn-singing. Jim told me of his disappointment about how infrequently children and teenagers perform music in church; the community’s musical standards have been simply too high to permit many unpolished performances. Praise music, however, has potentially opened the door for more youth empowerment, giving young people the opportunity to sing, to play instruments, and to be heard.

If hearing about Salem’s youth could just about convince one that praise music is the antidote to teenagers’ dislike of church, however, Salem-Zion’s story challenges the assumption. When I visited Freeman in the summer of 2001, I stayed, as usual, with Will and Sherilyn Ortman. They had just returned from the annual conference of the Mennonite Church U.S.A., which was held that year in Nashville, Tennessee. In their capacity as youth sponsors, accompanying the teenagers of Salem-Zion, they spent most of the week observing the youth activities that were part of the conference. It is custom, at the annual national Mennonite conferences, to create what is in essence a separate conference for youth. Young people attend their own events, all of which are carefully

planned and coordinated by conference organizers. In Nashville, while adults were mulling over the final details of a major denomination merger, young people sang contemporary Christian music and listened to evangelical speakers.

Both Will and Sherilyn felt that the youth were placed in a coercive situation. They described praise songs accompanied by hand waving, altar calls, and an acutely evangelical atmosphere that ran counter to what they thought their mentees were comfortable with. They didn't feel that these things were really Mennonite, and pointed out that many of the speakers and songleaders were not Mennonite themselves. They had a strong reaction against the music, which they felt was used as an instrument to manipulate the youth into certain kinds of behavior, and described how some of their youth practically wept with gratitude and relief when they were able to attend a hymn-sing with the adults. These youth, Will and Sherilyn felt, were unsure of what to do—participate in these adult-sanctioned activities despite their discomfort, or find ways to assert that lots of outward display was not an essential component of their faith?

During my next visit to Freeman, a year later, I interviewed some of the teenagers in the Salem-Zion youth group and asked them how they felt about the Nashville experience.²⁰ None of them spoke explicitly about coercion, but all had mixed feelings about what had gone on. One said, “I think there’s a certain stereotype that people have for teens and what they want. And so when we all got there, they probably thought, ‘just feed them praise songs, because that’s what they want.’” “Pizza and praise songs, man,” said another, with an ironic grin. He continued, “I find more spiritual value in hymn-

²⁰ I wasn't able to interview the Salem teenagers—for various reasons, it was far easier to access those from the North Church.

singing. I can't get into praise singing. At Nashville ... when people started clapping, and jumping up and down, I just felt awkward. It made me feel uncomfortable.”

Some did appreciate the style, however. After listening to several of his peers talk about their discomfort with contemporary worship, sixteen-year-old Cayley Ortman said, “I kind of find it different. I enjoy praise songs. I enjoy the atmosphere and the—it’s not quite an adrenalin rush, I’d call it, but you know, it’s different than a hymn-sing ... if you’re singing with a group that likes singing praise songs, you don’t feel left out because everyone’s participating. Whereas at church, everyone’s looking at you.”

Through hearsay, I learned about Salem-Zion’s experiences with praise music. Approximately a decade ago (give or take a year—no one could tell me exactly when), Salem-Zion instilled a contemporary worship time before their service. The music was introduced, according to Ellen Ortman, because it was thought that young people wanted it:

I was for it, because, the things I was hearing was that the children learn these songs at camp, it’s one way to make them feel included, if we would sing their type of songs. So I thought it had some merit. And my feeling was, or my understanding was that they were going to learn some of these between Sunday school and the worship service and then use them in the worship services from time to time, when people knew them. I was on the worship committee at that time, so that was a little bit the idea behind it.

The young people, however, did not respond as planned. Some of it, according to Ellen, was due to logistics—young families spent the time between Sunday school and worship collecting their children and didn’t have time to go into the sanctuary and learn new music. But most of my Salem-Zion consultants told me that people simply were not interested enough for the idea to take off. Of the perception that the music would include young people, one member said, “The youth often wouldn’t even come into the

sanctuary; they stayed out in the hall, which proved that it wasn't the young people that were crying to do that." Ellen described the demise of the program:

But it just didn't have enough support to—and now, we don't hear anything about it. You know, we went so far as to print up these little booklets, because there was this one couple that was especially pushing it, and so they took it upon themselves to actually print and get the rights to the songs and everything, and we never made much use of those books. They're out of the pews now completely.

One Salem member, speaking of her church's plan to assemble contemporary song booklets of its own, jokingly suggested that they just take the unused booklets from Salem-Zion. When I relayed this to Ellen, she laughed. "Yeah, they sure could have them," she said.

Bob Engbrecht, Salem-Zion's pastor, does not try to integrate contemporary Christian music into services, and because there are presently no vocal members expressing interest in it (that I know of), his music choices seem to work fine for his congregation. If anything was made evident to me in the course of learning about contemporary music in these churches, it was the extraordinary power of motivated individuals to affect change in their congregation's musical life. Even in small, rural communities, which are often portrayed as steeped in static traditions, change can come quickly when one or two people want it. Though I implied earlier that the "priesthood of all believers" doctrine is facilitated through hymn singing, it is also true that the same doctrine has made contemporary music a feasible alternative in churches deeply embedded in hymn traditions, for the simple reason that the people who want it are empowered enough to take their own desires seriously.

From all this, it's evident that no one can pit hymn lovers against praise music lovers and say unequivocally that one is abusing power over the other. I'm continually

struck, however, by how close to the surface power struggles seem to be when these musics are discussed in relation to each other (and certainly not only among Mennonites—many denominations are struggling with their own versions of the same problem). Perhaps it is the overlapping of two hegemonic forces that produces confusion: hymn singers still exercise hegemony in individual churches, even in larger church organizations, but contemporary Christian music is in many ways linked to forces of economic and cultural hegemony in wider American culture.

Chapter 2: Migrants, Martyrs, and Postnationalists: A Mennonite Dance of Past and Present

*At this also my heart trembles, and leaps out of its place.
Hearken to the thunder of his voice
and the rumbling that comes from his mouth.
Under the whole heaven he lets it go,
and his lightening to the corners of the earth.
After it his voice roars;
he thunders with his majestic voice
and he does not restrain the lightnings when his voice is heard.
God thunders wondrously with his voice;
he does great things which we cannot comprehend.
For to the snow he says, 'Fall on the earth';
and to the shower and the rain, 'Be strong.'
He seals up the hand of every man,
that all men may know his work.
Then the beasts go into their lairs,
and remain in their dens.
From its chamber comes the whirlwind,
and cold from the scattering winds.
By the breath of God ice is given,
and the broad waters are frozen fast.
He loads the thick cloud with moisture; the clouds scatter his lightening.
They turn round and round by his guidance,
to accomplish all that he commands them
on the face of the habitable world.
Whether for correction, or for his land,
or for love, he causes it to happen.*

--Job 37: 1-13

*O healing river,
Send down your waters,
Send down your waters
Upon this land.
O healing river,
Send down your waters,
And wash the blood
From off the sand.*

*This land is parching,
This land is burning,
No seed is growing
In the barren ground.
O healing river,*

*Send down your waters,
O healing river,
Send your waters down.*

*Let the seed of freedom
Awake and flourish,
Let the deep roots nourish.
Let the tall stalks rise.
O healing river,
Send down your waters,
O healing river,
From out of the skies.*

--Hymn number 372 in Hymnal: A Worship Book

I did the bulk of my Freeman fieldwork in the summer of 2002, when the wounds of September 11, 2001 were still fresh for many Americans, myself included. People in Freeman were relatively untouched by the tragedy, being so far removed from New York and Washington, D.C., but it did come up occasionally in conversations. One evening, in an interview with four Salem-Zion teenagers, we talked about 9/11 and its effects on the Freeman area Mennonites. If there was one thing that the terrorist acts and the subsequent war seemed to have brought up for these teenagers, it was a reexamination of their identity and beliefs as Mennonites. They explained that non-Mennonites in the Freeman area (the majority of the in-town population is not Mennonite) had felt some degree of antagonism towards the Mennonites during this time, particularly towards those outspoken in their pacifism.¹ This led us into a conversation about the freedoms that Americans are guaranteed, and how Mennonites, who have never been keen on national affiliations, fit into the American picture. Daniel Graber, a sixteen-year-old, said this:

¹ During a short visit in the spring of 2003, a browse through the local paper and a few conversations seemed to indicate that similar tensions had arisen again during the Iraq war. The mayor of Freeman was serving in the U.S. military in Iraq, which made the issue particularly pressing for the town.

If this wasn't a free nation, would we just take off like we did in Russia? Just go someplace else? That's what usually happened when people got so fed up with us that they didn't want us there anymore, so we left! But there's not too many places to go anymore...

When Daniel made this remark, I noticed the collective "we," encompassing all of us in the room and our immigrant ancestors. Despite Daniel's status as a teenager who was born, raised, and plans to settle in Freeman, a kid unapologetically attached to his family land, and a child of America whose essential freedoms have generally been preserved, he also, perhaps, sees himself alive in the past. His forebears, like mine, left the Russian province of Volhynia (in what is now the Ukraine) in the 1870s, leaving behind the threat of being drafted into the Russian army, and a czarist government whose favor they had lost. We have been taught to respect the sacrifices these farmers made. Buoyed only by faith and neighbors, they left their home of one hundred years for harsh new territory—South Dakota. The homesteading rush of the 1870s gave them a door out of Russia.

Why did they leave? This is the reason I have been taught: because, as Mennonites, they believed themselves to be children of God. They were not children of Russia, Switzerland, or any other nation in which they settled. They were Christians. And the Mennonite concept of Christianity, though various in its extremity, has always meant, to some degree, that no nation comes before Christ. Any sacrifice that the world demands in order to maintain this loyalty must be made. Daniel and Cayley Ortman, another Freeman teenager, encapsulated this viewpoint in a snippet of their conversation:

DANIEL: I don't like that term, the real world.

STEPHANIE: Do you feel like you're not living in the real world, here?

DANIEL: What does that mean? If you're a Christian, what is the real world?

CAYLEY: The real world is everyone else.

DANIEL: If you're a Christian, and you live your life like a Christian, then the real world shouldn't influence you or bother you at all.

We weren't even discussing Mennonites at this point, but Daniel and Cayley's comments showed me how profoundly their perceptions of themselves in relation to the world have been shaped by the Mennonite faith. In this conversation, these youth stood squarely on the shoulders of their forebears; by acknowledging their spiritual affiliation as the primary force in their lives and eschewing the "real world," the original Mennonites suggested a radical rearrangement of the priorities that were (and continue to be) accepted norms. Martyrdom and migration were among the sacrifices that they and their descendents accepted, an inevitable accompaniment, it would seem, to their brand of faith. This chapter is an exploration of martyrdom and migration as Mennonite cultural tropes. In his study of Haitian Rara, Michael Largey explains the "traditionalizing process:" the process by which people use what they know of the past to make sense of their present. Accepting the premise that "traditionalizing processes are emergent,"² and that cultural tropes are reimagined and given meaning according to the needs of new generations and new locations, these two big "M"s of Mennonite identity bear examination within modern settings. They function as a framework with which Mennonites interpret both their history and their current lives. Congregational singing and church music take a back seat here, but they remain very much a part of the picture, for they are among the practices that sustain Mennonites through hardship.

² Michael Largey. "Politics on the Pavement: Haitian Rara as a Traditionalizing Process." *Journal of American Folklore*. 113, no. 449 (2000): 241.

I don't know if Daniel, Cayley, or the other teenagers I spoke with ever imagine that their government could someday do something that would force them to pick up and migrate to another country, as their ancestors did. I suspect that this seemingly remote possibility exists for them mostly in the abstract. However, as I hinted at in the previous chapter, the militarism of the Bush administration and the new powers of the Justice Department have frightened some Mennonites deeply, particularly, I believe, my own generation, which did not live through the social and political turmoil of the sixties and seventies. The fact that their pacifist doctrine puts them in direct conflict with the current government's guiding principles has made what was once an abstraction a bit more trenchant.³ This current dilemma is magnified for many by the fact that their ancestors' migrations were often spurred on by unsympathetic governments. Many, if not most, ethnic Mennonites⁴ live in a conscious relationship with their ancestral history of migration.

As is the case with migration, martyrdom is a frequent theme when Mennonites talk about their history and faith. For instance, when I was a young teenager, the Sunday school class I attended did a semester-long unit on Anabaptist martyrdom. Our teacher, a Mennonite history enthusiast from the congregation, tackled the task eagerly, using as his main text a book famed in Anabaptist circles: *The Martyr's Mirror*.⁵ This gruesome but

³ By this comment I don't wish to imply that Mennonites *en masse* are of any particular political stripe. Party affiliations and voting patterns among Mennonites vary greatly.

⁴ The term "ethnic Mennonite" can be used problematically, but I use it for lack of a better way of referring to those Mennonites who trace their roots to European Anabaptist movements.

⁵ The full title of the book, generally shortened to *Martyr's Mirror*, is *The Bloody Theater or Martyr's Mirror of the Defenseless Christians Who Baptized Only Upon Confession of Faith, and Who Suffered and Died for the Testimony of Jesus, Their Savior, from the Time of Christ to the Year 1600*.

revered volume tells the stories of the early Anabaptists, who broke off from the state church in Switzerland during the Counter-Reformation, enduring abuse, torture, and execution as result of their steadfast insistence on their newfound doctrines. The contents of this volume are a rich source of cultural and spiritual lore for Mennonites, providing material for historical studies, poetry, dramatizations, museum exhibits, and even a low-budget movie.⁶ Julia Kasdorf has suggested that the book is also a tool that Mennonites use to understand their relationship to the world, writing, “it seems that the book was most often printed in conjunction with an impending war, the need for stories felt most keenly in relation to the community’s fresh fears of persecution.”⁷ Her assessment squares well with my own experience of Mennonites in wartime; during such times, I have seen Anabaptist martyrs held up as examples of what sacrifices one may have to make for faith and principles.

As the identity markers of migration and martyrdom show, the Mennonite faith has a long history of encouraging its followers to envision a strong separation between themselves and the rest of the world. Even without the literal embodiment of this vision—separatist communities that interact with outsiders as little as possible—there remains a mentality that the world is corrupt and separation from it is the best possible redemption. Faith is the thing that makes this separation possible, and makes the corruption, if it infringes on one’s life, bearable and more easily defied. In the Mennonite cosmology, the world is barren land, and faith is water.

⁶ *The Radicals*, made in 1989, tells the story of Michael and Margaretha Sattler, sixteenth-century Anabaptists who were executed.

⁷ Kasdorf, 180.

For Mennonites, singing is often the thing that brings faith into relationship with the world. Its visceral power makes it an effective aid in both enduring the world's corruption and bearing witness. For instance, *The Martyr's Mirror* stories tell how early Anabaptists would sing in order to withstand the agonies of torture, until the torturers tired of it and quieted them with tongue pincers or something similarly heinous. Some managed to sing even through the pincers, and paid for it with their tongues. They also sang on their way to be burned at the stake, as many Anabaptists were during this time, continuing their songs as the flames leapt around them.

Commonly propagated among Mennonites is the idea that these martyrs were so secure in their faith and eager for their union with God that they felt no fear when faced with imminent, horrible death. Their singing became the living representation of death-defying faith. If the early Anabaptists had a faith so strong that they could sing at their executions, the cultural logic goes, then Anabaptist faith should be adequate to see its followers through anything. The concept of singing for survival has been locked into the Mennonite cultural memory. Singing represents the spirituality that, more than any ethnic background or location, is at the core of Mennonite peoplehood.

Faith-Centered Diaspora

In the essay "Patriotism and Its Futures," Arjun Appadurai expounds on the notion of postnationalism, asserting that the nation-state has outlived its relevance as an organizing principle of humankind and that diasporic identities are increasingly the norm. He writes that as a direct consequence of globalization, people no longer need look to the nation to define them—global mass media, transcontinental business, and the ease of

modern travel have given many human beings ample resources from which to assemble their identities as they wish. Furthermore, a continual, perceived need for a physical nation to call home has led to much violence and strife amidst various diasporic groups. This, Appadurai claims, is one of the most potent arguments for the need to “think of ourselves beyond the nation.”⁸

If one is to conceive of Mennonites as a diaspora—and considering their historical mobility, it can certainly be argued that one should—they don’t fit easily into Appadurai’s postnational paradigm. However, his essay gives us a vocabulary with which to place them historically, which is why I refer to it here. To begin with, the term “postnational” is perhaps most useful here not to describe a recent, globalization-spurred phenomenon, but to label what Mennonites have been for the duration of their movement. Early Anabaptists earned their volumes of martyr history by defying national governments (which were at the time also religious governments), asserting that they took their marching orders from a higher power and not from any human-appointed authority. A map that shows the many migrations of Mennonite groups throughout their nearly five century history is evidence of how little attachment they have had as a people to specific countries.⁹ According to the records of their plight, martyrdom is what happens when Mennonites can’t get out of a nation, and migration is what happens when they can.

⁸ Arjun Appadurai. “Patriotism and its Futures.” in *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1996),158.

⁹ The most comprehensive account of Mennonite migration history remains the decidedly apologist but historically valuable *The Story of the Mennonites*, by C. Henry Smith. It should also be mentioned that I speak here of Mennonites as a group—with every migration there were individuals who stayed behind, for various reasons, as Smith documents in his work.

Returning to present-day America, a postnational Anabaptist background is a powerful tool for Mennonites who are constructing a modern, more Appadurain sort of postnationality for themselves. Here I am best equipped to discuss myself as an example. To explain my own postnational leanings, I must give some personal background. My four grandparents all come from a small group of Mennonites (the same group from which the majority of my East Freeman consultants originate) of Swiss origin, called the “Swiss Volhynians” in the Mennonite lexicon. This designation comes from the group’s one hundred-year stay in the then-Russian province of Volhynia. Growing up in central Kansas, where many Mennonites come from other groups that migrated from Russia, my family and others from the Volhynian group were regarded within the immediate Mennonite community as “Swiss.” The other Mennonite groups in the area were called “Russian Mennonites,” not because their ancestry was any more Russian than ours (we all have very little, if any, ethnic Russian blood), but because their ancestors, of mostly Dutch and German extraction, were there for a longer time. This designation, which can seem utterly incomprehensible to outsiders, remains alive and well in the area even after one hundred-plus years in Kansas. When my husband, who is of “Russian” Mennonite background on his father’s side, and I were married, some of my family even joked that we had a “mixed marriage,” despite the fact that outsiders would certainly see a marriage between two Caucasian Mennonites as anything but mixed. All this is not to demonstrate that central Kansan Mennonites are inordinately obsessed with arcane questions of ancestry (although that argument can and has been made, at least on a colloquial level), but to show that Mennonites continue to wear national affiliations like ill-fitting hats.

No national affiliation was so discomfiting for me as that of the United States. The Swiss and Russian designations were mostly theoretical ones for my generation, but whether or not to make America a strong part of my identity was an everyday choice with consequences. Raised in a Mennonite household, I never had a strong sense of Americanness, but patriotism was encouraged in the small-town, midwestern schools that I attended, and I was frequently conflicted over simple things such as if I should say the American Pledge of Allegiance or stand for the national anthem. As a child and adolescent, I saw myself as part of a postnational tribe.

As an adult, living the somewhat itinerant life of a graduate student and far away from my childhood home, my tribal inheritance of postnationalism came into dialogue with the realities of my American life. I realized how easily some Mennonites that I knew opted out of the consequences of bearing a white, American identity by asserting the primacy of the Mennonite part of themselves.¹⁰ I resisted the Mennonite designation, finding it difficult to explain to those who knew nothing about it and frustrated by the politics of the current Mennonite church structure; yet during intense waves of American nationalism (such as during the fall of 2001), I found my Anabaptist roots intact,

¹⁰ For instance, a college friend of mine related to me her experience as an administrator in a Mennonite relief organization that was marred by racial tensions; during a conversation about what needed to change, one colleague announced that she was not white, she was Mennonite. What was most likely an honest attempt to distance herself from one of the world's most problematic ways of categorizing people—race—came across to my friend as a shirking of the responsibility that she bore to make things better, and as a denial of reality (for, at least outwardly, the woman was indeed white). Julia Kasdorf writes about how the Anabaptist martyrs taught her what she calls a “splintering trick,” (“Writing like a Mennonite.” in *The Body and the Book*, 170) enabling her to disassociate from her body during sexual abuse; I would argue that the “splintering trick” is useful for Mennonites on many levels. It is certainly a standard Mennonite device for separating themselves from “worldly” designations and reasserting their membership in a postnational, faith-centered diaspora.

alternately comforting and cumbersome. Non-Anabaptist sources now nurtured my postnationalism as I encountered an array of borderless entities concerned with peace, justice, and human rights,¹¹ values that I had learned under primarily Mennonite auspices. Most importantly, my primary associates were non-Mennonites who engendered these values and, like me, were engaged in reconciling their national affiliations with a global consciousness. All these things have amounted, for me, to an imperfect balancing of my tribal roots with experiences that both reaffirm some of my tribe's values and expose the dangerous side of "thinking tribally." My postnational identity is a conglomeration of disparate sources, with my membership in a faith-centered diaspora an uneasy but powerful factor.

I cannot and will not argue that my East Freeman consultants' identity making endeavors mirror my own; their everyday experiences and lifestyles differ greatly from mine. Nevertheless, we share many traits: a Mennonite college education, an upbringing in an ethnic Mennonite stronghold, and a strong connection to farming. Additionally, I am in one distant way or another related to many of them—I have no problem playing the Mennonite last name game in Freeman.¹² Thus my story both is and is not like theirs. I share my own story because it shows one way that a person of cultural and ethnic Mennonite heritage can integrate their tribal inheritance into life. The people I know in East Freeman bear an inheritance like mine but live it out differently. Together our

¹¹ Appadurai mentions some in his essay, Oxfam and Amnesty International among them.

¹² "The Mennonite Game," as Mennonites generally call it, involves establishing common ground with Mennonite acquaintances through the discussion of family connections. A typical exchange begins with an introduction, to which the other party responds by repeating the name and saying, "Now who were your parents?" If this doesn't yield recognition, it's common to move on to grandparents or other family members.

experiences emphasize how the Mennonite diaspora is both rooted and rootless—rooted in the various environments that its people call home, and rootless in the sense that every environment has the potential to fail, to turn against its inhabitants, to thrust them back into the spiritual foundation that is the heart of Anabaptist postnationality.

The story that I tell of East Freeman is one with a specific territory and its demands very much at its center. Because East Freeman is a farming community, dependent on the land for its day-to-day sustenance, weather plays a major role in the lives of its inhabitants. Eastern South Dakota is a challenging place to be a farmer. Though arable land is plentiful, the weather is capricious and often too dry to guarantee healthy crops. Winters can be treacherous and harsh. Weather, a powerful force completely beyond human control, is an arena in which the people here see themselves interacting with God. Spiritual resources are the only available and useful resources for dealing with something so otherwise insurmountable. Coming from a faith-centered diaspora with a history of persecution and displacement, people in East Freeman are well acquainted with the concept of extreme hardship, well aware that no single location will simply offer them happiness and prosperity. This awareness, perhaps as much as anything, enables them to achieve the balance of nurturing (the land) and surrendering (to the uncontrollable factors) that is necessary to make this challenging landscape their home.

View from the Wind Tower

At the Ortman farm there is a tall wind generator, from which a person can have a bird's-eye view for miles. It can take ten minutes to get to the top, and anyone with the

slightest fear of heights would be foolish to attempt it; the stairs have open backs and it's easy to get dizzy. At the top is a small cabin with windows all around. When Will Ortman was a boy, he had sleepovers up there with his friends. On the side of the cabin is a metal ladder that leads to the generator's blades (which are no longer in place—they came down during a storm and have never been put back). Anyone who fell from this ladder would survive only through marvelous grace. Will or Sherilyn told me how one day Arlen happened to look up there and saw two grandchildren climbing it—a ladder meant to be climbed only with protective belts and straps. He didn't know what to do—yell? Let them find their own way down? I don't remember what happened, other than that everyone came out of it, miraculously, alive and uninjured.

My daily hikes up the wind tower generally ended on the landing beneath the cabin. I was too afraid of falling (irrationally—there were railings) to attempt lifting the floor-level door, as I wouldn't be able to see my feet while doing so. After flight after flight of turning stairs, it required about all my concentration just to stay balanced. The powerful plains wind made the tower sway, which is necessary for such structures but disconcerting nonetheless.

Once I got my bearings, though, a certain comfort would set in. I could see the horizon from all four directions. Spread passively beneath was field after square field of corn and soybeans and the occasional alfalfa or barley. Farmsteads, silos, and barns dotted the grid of fields. The grazing cattle were miniscule. It appeared like a grand pecking order, with everyone and everything in sight at the mercy of the cloudless sky.

Praying for Rain

On the day I arrived Freeman last summer, July 5, 2002, nearly a month had passed there without rain. Unfortunately, it was an important month for the farmers in Freeman, a crucial window of time during which water was essential for their corn. I did not grow up on a farm myself, but I spent many of my childhood weekends on my grandparents' farm, and my father now helps farm this land on weekends, so I know well the anxious vigils that farmers keep in front of the weather report on the nightly news. When you don't want the rest of the news, you turn the volume down or put it on mute, but once the weather comes on, silence is imposed, save for a celebratory exclamation or mumbled curse.

Mumbled curses were the order of the day for most of my time in Freeman, as well as prayers. On July 8, I wrote in my field journal, "It was overcast this morning, which I'm sure had everyone's heart jumping with hope for rain, but alas, it didn't deliver, and by mid-afternoon it was ghastly hot as usual. Everyone here is praying for rain. Pastor Bob even prayed for it in church yesterday." On July 9, we had one day of respite from the heat and drought; a spectacular, soul-purging Great Plains storm that brewed seductively through the morning and afternoon and gave way to great heaves of wind, rain, and electricity in the evening. Much rejoicing was had over this storm, which flirted with the disaster of hail but held back just in time to preserve the crops. The land was watered, the air cleared, and spirits generally restored. Storms on the Plains, when they don't get carried away tearing up houses and uprooting trees, often have this effect.

The post-storm euphoria lasted for a day or so. Then the sun came back out, everything dried, and the sky, once again, was relentlessly cloudless. One day of rain wasn't enough for most people; their crops were badly in need of another. This next rain

didn't come for weeks; I had left the area by then. My friends told me about it over e-mail. For the remainder of my stay, the temperature lingered in the nineties or higher, and one punishing day reached 106. The pastoral prayers for rain resumed in church on Sundays, and I'm sure that many private prayers also turned again to pleas for mercy.

Farming, the profession that has sustained Anabaptist peoples for centuries, requires a lot of waiting. Without faith that something will eventually take pity on the thirsty land—and thus on you—it's nearly impossible to farm without despairing. Jim Graber, a livestock farmer (and an area-renowned bass soloist), spoke to me of his faith in a time of drought: "...I've had to think in the last couple of weeks of Elijah, the oratorio, where they pray for rain, and there's the waiting and the patience and the small cloud. The small cloud will come, eventually. Even though we see nothing now, like a little child." His comment illuminates both how he uses faith to achieve the nurture/surrender balance, and how music aids him in that process. It's noteworthy that his reference point for the Elijah story is not its Biblical source, the first book of Kings, but rather Mendelssohn's rendition of it.

Beautiful though it is, the Freeman area seems to demand this kind of surrender. There are few trees and few buildings, and more sky is visible than in any other landscape I have encountered, other than the Plains in my native Kansas. Utter dependence on the weather, and one's powerlessness over it, is thrown into sharp relief when the sky, the source of it all, is such a constant presence. As Jim predicted, a small cloud did come eventually, and the rain in August was sufficient to pull southeastern South Dakota out of its drought, although the western part of the state retained moderate

to severe conditions for the rest of the summer, making national headlines and requiring federal assistance. So for Freeman, at least, there was finally some mercy.

Making History: A Winter Martyring

It was Thursday, January 12, 1888, in rural Freeman, South Dakota, and no one could decide whether to send their children to school. It was clear, and not too cold, but a blizzard was lurking on the horizon. Parents conferred with their eldest children; in a land of frequent snowstorms, business had to go on as usual, but on the other hand, how would they get home if the blizzard was bad? For most students, the walk to school was at least several miles, with few landmarks to find in a whiteout. In the end, about half of the students in the local one-room schoolhouse made their way across the fields. Mothers prayed. Mrs. Albrecht even cried when her John left; she knew something was not right, begged him not to go. But a brave boy could not be held back.

The storm hit about mid-morning, hard. The teacher shook his head and wondered what he would do—he only had seven students that day, but somehow he had to get them to safety once school was out. After he finished teaching, he conferred with the older boys, trying to decide whether they should go or stay. The teacher was adamant—they should go, proceed to the Graber farm, which was less than a quarter mile north of school, and stay there until things cleared up. By the time they left, the snow was several feet deep, and the wind was beating at them from the northwest so hard that they could barely stand up against it. Things didn't happen the way they should have, somehow. The eldest student, Peter Graber, along with the three Kaufman boys and John Albrecht, took the lead immediately, and set off without John and Andrew, the other Graber boys. John, Andrew and the teacher managed to find one another, and they headed for the farm, assuming the five others were ahead of them and would make it there first.

With the blinding snow obscuring everything, it was nearly impossible to find the house. The plains stretched out into nothingness; how could a person find a house when one couldn't even tell the earth from the sky? The teacher, with John and Andrew still in tow, realized after a time that they must have passed the farm. By this time their fingers and heads were frozen; later, after they thawed, they lost skin, fingernails, hair. A row of trees next to the Graber house was their salvation. Finally, they made it to the porch and staggered in. The five other boys were not there.

And they didn't come, and didn't come. Thursday dragged to a close, and still, none of them showed. On Friday, the neighbors began to search for the boys. The storm subsided, but they had no luck. None on Saturday, either.

But on Sunday morning before church, someone found them. It was one of the big, fatherless Goertzen boys, on the farm three miles southeast of the school, who happened to walk past the lone row of trees at the edge of the yard, and saw the five boys underneath. They had settled down there, the eldest boys holding the little ones close for warmth and comfort, and slept.

This story is my retelling of an old family tale, one my mother grew up hearing. I based my version in part on the story as I heard it from Arlen Ortman, a Freeman consultant, and in part on a diary entry I found in our family genealogy, written by one of the Graber brothers. Peter Graber, one of the eldest boys to die in the storm, is my ancestor, a great-great uncle. His father, Peter O. Graber, was among the first settlers of Freeman. The 1888 storm was not the only tragedy to befall this family—the next year, their house was destroyed in a prairie fire. South Dakota was not kind to them. Several years after the fire, they moved to Kansas.

Arlen Ortman really likes to tell this story. He loves old Freeman legends and has an understated yet keen sense of drama. I heard it from him on my first extended visit to Freeman, in the summer of 2001. Because my parents were there, having driven up from Kansas that day to see me perform in a recital at the Salem-Zion Mennonite Church, Arlen proposed that a fine evening's entertainment might be a car tour of the various landmarks relevant to the bitter tale. We stopped first at the Salem-Zion cemetery, where the five boys are buried in one grave, with one headstone. Much like the rural cemeteries in central Kansas where my grandparents are buried, a few last names dominate the Salem-Zion headstones. The names in Kansas and here are often the same ones, too: Waltner, Graber, Kaufman, Schrag, Albrecht. At Salem-Zion, a very few Krehbiels (most of them went to Kansas). When I looked at the boys' headstone, I imagined the Kaufman boys' parents, who lost three sons in one day.

Arlen showed us the schoolhouse site, the nearby Graber farm, and the cache of trees in the Goertzen yard, pitifully off-course, where the boys took their final rest. My mother shivered when we stopped at the last site. "I've heard that story all my life," she

said, “and it’s never given me goosebumps like this.” I felt slightly ill as I looked at the site where the five boys perished. “It must have been quite a frightful thing for those children,” I remember Arlen saying.

Plains people, native or transplanted, tell stories of freezing deaths. It is no wonder—the dangers of winter storms are one of the crueler facts of life there, especially in the Northern Plains. To freeze, in many of these tales, is to rest for a time in a place between life and death, where divine mercy and wisdom take over. When it snows so much that the land and the sky are indistinguishable from one another, there is a rhetorical opening, a chance to imagine the intersection of this life and the next one. For the storyteller, the frozen landscape is a crucible for encounters with the divine. For instance, Plains storyteller Louise Erdrich, uses the freezing death to such effect several times in her multi-volume saga of a North Dakota Ojibwe family. In *The Bingo Palace*, she lets her hero, Lipsha Morrissey, describe his own death in a blizzard:

As I fall away into my sleep, I’m almost happy things have turned out this way. I am not afraid. An unknown path opens up before us, an empty trail shuts behind. Snow closes over our tracks, and then keeps moving like the tide. There is no trace where we were. Nor any arrows pointing to the place where we’re headed. We are the trackless beat, the invisible light, the thought without a word to speak. Poured water, struck match. Before the nothing, we are the moment.¹³

Erdrich puts Lipsha in a zone between two worlds, where he is able to encounter the inevitability of death without fear or dread. Significantly, it is the force of nature, the endless snow, that brings him to this place. His death functions in the book as these stories often do in real life; by making the reader or listener confront the unshakable power of the natural world, a thing utterly beyond human control, and its potential for

¹³ Louise Erdrich. *The Bingo Palace*. (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 259.

seemingly meaningless destruction, it begs the big questions. Where do we come from? Why do we die when we do? Could we have prevented this fate?

These questions must have sat heavily on the Freeman community in that 1888 winter that took five of their innocents with seemingly senseless force. They also surely asked the question that Anabaptists have always asked: how do we survive this obstacle and keep our faith? After living through this tragedy and the next year's fire, I can imagine that the Graber family felt like the Old Testament's Job, suffering inexplicable losses and forced to his knees before God. After leaving a home where their way of life was threatened, they found another that allowed them free worship but threatened them through new and less predictable channels. And so they migrated—not across national borders, but to yet another home where they might farm, worship, and raise what was left of their family.

Through the lenses of martyrdom and migration, this story fits into a narrative of Mennonite hardship, endurance, and isolation. These are problematic lenses. Embracing a narrative of victimhood has done much damage to Mennonites, just as it has other peoples with displacement and martyrdom in their histories. The process of traditionalizing, to use Michael Largey's language, involves a dance with our ancestors and a dance with our present and like any dance with three partners, it can be clumsy, even injurious at times. However, as Mennonites are increasingly obliged to fit into less ethnically bound paradigms, such as Appadurai's postnational one, they have to keep the dance going—the modern world mandates no less.

Chapter 3: Planting, Praying, and Bearing Witness: Faith as Resistance

We get pleasure from seeing any good crop, our own or someone else's. Watching a thick stream of grain pour out of the combine into a truck gives a feeling of richness that has nothing to do with money. I think it must be akin to the "fatness" spoken of in the Bible. Beyond sufficiency, it is repletion, and complete—at least at the moment—contentment. The land may not always belong to us, but our hearts will always belong to it.

—Audrey A. Keith, from "Going Home"¹

*I go from the woods into the cleared field:
A place no human made, a place unmade
By human greed, and to be made again.
Where centuries of leaves once built by dying
A deathless potency of light and stone
And old of all that grew and fell, the timeless
Fell into time. The earth fled with the rain,
The growth of fifty thousand years undone
In a few careless seasons, stripped to rock
And clay—a "new land," truly, that no race
Was ever native to, but hungry mice
And sparrows and the circling hawks, dry thorns
And thistles sent by generosity
Of new beginning. No Eden, this was
A garden once, a good and perfect gift;
Its possible abundance stood in it
As it then stood. But now what it might be
Must be foreseen, darkly, through many lives—
Thousands of years to make it what it was,
Beginning now, in our few troubled days.*

—Wendell Berry²

During these times, it is impossible to write about small farms, small farmers, and small farming communities without conveying some sense of imperative. In an economy that dictates mass production as the key to viability and success, family farms struggle.

¹ Linda Hasselstrom, Gaydell Collier and Nancy Curtis, eds. *Leaning into the Wind: Women Write from the Heart of the West*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), 103.

² Wendell Berry. *A Timbered Choir: the Sabbath Poems 1979-1997*. (New York: Counterpoint Press, 1999), 16.

East Freeman, a community both founded on and sustained by agriculture, is profoundly affected by market demands for increased production and the expansionist farming principles that have inevitably resulted. Coupled with this is a perpetually poor economy, a lack of jobs outside of agriculture, and other related factors that have led many people born and bred in the community to leave it. One of the most striking things about my trips to Freeman has been people's frankness about their economic and cultural struggles. They have reached a stage, I think, where there is little point in hiding their obvious challenges in making a living.

The majority of my farming consultants have not benefited very much from the quantity-driven, corporately-dominated agriculture that is now our national norm. In the course of my fieldwork, I have spoken with hardly any farmers who routinely buy new land, have multiple employees outside of their own families, and obtain their seeds, fertilizer, and equipment from major agricultural corporations, although there are such farmers in the area. The major reason for the absence of their voices here is the lack of such farmers in the churches I studied; some consultants have explained to me that the bigger farmers in their area tend not to be Mennonite, or churchgoers in general. Because the majority of farmers in the Salem and Salem-Zion congregations are small-scale and family-based, I have focused on their stories.

Wendell Berry, the poet, farmer, and essayist quoted in this chapter's epigraph, wrote the essay "Think Little" in the early seventies, chronicling the de-localization of American agriculture and its devastating effect on the farming profession and the environment. He describes the financial and cultural situation of small farmers, a picture that still rings true in East Freeman:

For an index of our loss of contact with the earth we need only look at the condition of the American farmer. ... In an age of unparalleled affluence and leisure, the American farmer is harder pressed and harder worked than ever before; his margin of profit is small, his hours are long ... he is being forced more and more to depend on the use of destructive chemicals and on the wasteful methods of haste and anxiety. So far as I can see, farming is considered marginal or incidental to the economy of the country, and farmers, when thought of at all, are thought of as hicks and yokels, whose lives do not fit into the modern scene.³

The Mennonite farmers in East Freeman are part of a disadvantaged minority, economically disenfranchised and lacking in political and cultural power. The increasing power of large agricultural corporations and big business-friendly legislation plays a part, but Berry is perhaps most astute in pointing out the forgotten state of farmers. In the era of the mega-supermarket (which is even more firmly entrenched in our culture now than when Berry wrote his essay), I've often heard it joked that Americans think their food grows on grocery store shelves. All humor aside, forgetting where food comes from also means forgetting the people who grow it. This phenomenon, the simple absence of farmers in the minds of the buying and eating American public, is a powerful factor in farmers' oppression.

The toll of this situation on farmers themselves is difficult to contemplate. Anxiety over the possibility of failure, feelings of isolation and loneliness, the perception of indifference from the outside world—even one of these things can do a farmer in. But many small farmers face all of these factors routinely, and keep going anyway. Why is this? No one answer is satisfactory, but in East Freeman, it's clear that the churches act as a sustaining force, helping to pull their farmers through tough times. The individual

³ Wendell Berry. "Think Little." in *A Continuous Harmony*. (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1972), 78.

burdens of farming become a collective burden when brought to the church community, and for many, this makes it easier to go on.

Recognizing the pressing needs of the farmers during a season of drought, South Church pastor Roy Kaufman offered this prayer while visiting the North Church, on July 14, 2002:

Gracious and just God, hear the cries of your people. Hear the cry of creation as the parched land waits for rain to fall. We know it is your intention that the earth be fruitful. We don't understand why sometimes there is drought. It grieves us to see the suffering of creation. It tears us apart when fields and gardens and trees we have tended with care dry up. It makes us frustrated and angry. Lord, hear our cry!

This morning we also cry to you as a rural community of faith, a community under siege to powerful forces in our culture—the political power of an empire, the economic power of multi-national corporations, and the technical power of elite specialists. In our rural communities these forces are threatening to dismantle the very structures of our life together. They set us against one another as competitors. They sap our confidence in ourselves. Whether by seduction or by force, they lead us to give up our trust in you, O God, and to rely on the idols of nationalism and militarism, materialism of greed, and pride in our human ingenuity and knowledge.

O God, confound these forces arrayed against us with the thunder of your mighty voice! More than that, call us back to you with the still, small voice of your love. Enable us to continue building the alternative communities of justice, peace and love outlined in the commandments of your covenant with the people of Israel, and in the teachings of Jesus, who in his body and blood has given us the new covenant of abundant and eternal life, the privilege of sharing in your divine life, both here on earth and throughout eternity. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Roy's prayer was a powerfully subversive act. The "idols" he names are readily accepted facets of modern American life: large corporations, continual technological advancements, and the vastly powerful American government. There are many bolder ways to challenge such unstoppable forces as these, but in a place as small and unknown as Freeman, resistance often comes subtly, through a lack of complicity with the hegemonic powers that be. Roy's prayer demonstrated his lack of complicity. Whenever I

hear family farming referred to as a “dying way of life,” I am more convinced that the small farmers who continue to stand up to the odds and make a living off their land are demonstrating their own lack of complicity. This chapter discusses the subtle threads of resistance that have been woven into the spiritual and cultural ways of being in the East Freeman community.

Mennonites have a long history of using the act of bearing witness as a form of resistance. For early Anabaptists, given the choice between rejoining the Catholic church and being executed, the only available resistance, often, was to speak their truth to power: in prison cells, on torture wheels, and before crowds at the executioner’s stake. So threatening was this witnessing to their oppressors that often bound prisoners on the way to execution were often outfitted with tongue-screws to prevent them from singing, preaching, or quoting scripture.⁴ Julia Kasdorf, writing of her survival of childhood sexual abuse, explains the influence of the Anabaptist witnesses on her own choices:

The tight-lipped survival strategy of my childhood is no longer useful, and in the martyr stories, I now see, not submission and silence, but men and women who spoke with their words and with their bodies, who refused to hold their tongues or keep the peace. Although I have succumbed to both temptations, I now write not for revenge—following popular tales of victim and monster—nor for redemption—following a Christian paradigm that is often too swift to be true ... I write simply to remember and to bear witness.⁵

The peculiar danger of witness-bearing, when not done with the grace and humility of a Julia Kasdorf or a Roy Kaufman, is its easy flirtation with self-righteousness. Like resisters and community-builders everywhere, Mennonites often fall into the trap of romanticizing and idealizing their communities of faith. In the language

⁴ For stories of Anabaptist martyrs, see *The Story of the Mennonites* by C. Henry Smith. Stronger stomachs may try the *Martyr’s Mirror*.

⁵ Kasdorf, 189.

of resistance cultures and among the scholars who study them, there is sometimes a tendency to heroize the counter-hegemonic community and portray it as a unified, singular identity. Being a Mennonite myself, I am both particularly susceptible to and particularly aware of this pitfall. In my personal life as a fringe member of Mennonite institutions, I'm often irritated by how unwilling Mennonites are to problematize the community entity that they champion. In fact, in my experience, they all too frequently bulldoze over their differences with banal language that is at least partly intended to make dissenters look churlish and uncooperative. Like a democracy, a functional Mennonite community of any size requires much hard work to both ensure cooperation and deal constructively with dissent. Likewise, the scholar studying a counter-hegemonic community (which I will argue that the Mennonites still are) has a watch to keep; he or she must be careful to avoid a mode of discourse that idealizes the body of resisters, denying their fallible and complicated humanity. Insider researchers, as Mennonite scholars generally have been, must perhaps be doubly vigilant against apologism for those about which they write. I negotiate this chapter with these tensions very much in mind. Historian Florencia E. Mallon, in *Peasant and Nation: the Making of Postcolonial Mexico and Peru*, affirms the complexity of her own chosen communities of study; she writes, "Rural communities were never undifferentiated wholes but historically dynamic entities whose identities and lines of unity and division were constantly being negotiated."⁶ Similarly, the East Freeman community shouldn't be depicted as a harmonious community of equals working towards a common goal. Anabaptists are just as subject to internal politics, just as capable of oppressing each other and promoting

⁶ Florencia E. Mallon. *Peasant and Nation: the Making of Postcolonial Mexico and Peru*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 11.

inequality (particularly between the sexes), as anyone else.⁷ My impulse is to guard against essentialism that portrays the rural community as a simple unit.

How does this connect to resistance? In recent years, ethnographic scholars have shied away from talking about communities of resistance, often in response to previous work that did the sort of romanticizing of resistance culture that I have discussed. This is understandable; nonetheless, it does members of an oppressed community an equal disservice to dismiss, or simply ignore, the methods of resistance that they have developed. In East Freeman, where nearly everyone who participates in agriculture struggles under the yoke of profit-driven agribusiness and the average shopper's complacency with its stranglehold, spirituality is resistance. In a classic Mennonite fashion, it bears witness to injustice, exerts pleas for divine mercy, and, ultimately, empowers people to continue with a lifestyle that wider culture has deemed dying and irrelevant. Wendell Berry has written, "The real sources of hope are personal and spiritual, not public and political."⁸ Were it solely public and political support sustaining small farmers in East Freeman (if by this one refers to the public and political institutions outside of their immediate community), most of them would have surely given up long ago.

⁷ For a listing of the particular sins of East Freeman, based on surveys of respondents who have left the community, see Marilyn Preheim Rose's *On the Move: A Study of Migration and Ethnic Persistence Among Mennonites from East Freeman, South Dakota* (New York: AMS Press, 1989, p. 160). Preheim Rose makes the important point that her respondents' stated "disadvantages of living in East Freeman" are often the flip side of their stated "advantages of living in East Freeman." For instance, "The advantage of friendly, helpful trustworthy people has as its opposite the disadvantage of gossip and lack of privacy" (161).

⁸ Wendell Berry, "Discipline and Hope." in *A Continuous Harmony*, pg. 133.

But the lynchpin of their resistance is the transformation of individual burdens into collective ones. People in East Freeman tend to regard American culture as very individualistic (see Chapter 1 for evidence of this), and consciously strive to mold their community in contrast to this. In Roy's prayer, he asks God to help them sustain "alternative communities of justice, peace and love." His use of the word "alternative" is telling—he's aware that such communities must be created in opposition to the accepted norm. From an agricultural perspective, this is where the spiritual melts very naturally into the practical. Large-scale farmers have multiple employees to handle their workload, but small farmers need good friends and neighbors to get the harvest done in time. When they are part of the sort of community that Roy described, this help is much easier to come by, and generally given in good faith. This sort of work-sharing can't be underestimated, either; when a small farmer has only one combine and one hundred acres of corn to harvest before the next predicted rainfall, a neighbor's help can be the difference between a profitable harvest and serious financial hardship.

How a harvest of plenty can starve the land: Wes Jackson's paradox

Wes Jackson, a progressive agriculturalist, writes in his essay, "The Failure of Success:"

Some things make no sense. Consider these paradoxes of our time. There is less soil on our fields each year, but there is more total production from the fields. The soil becomes increasingly poisoned from farm chemicals and salts from irrigation, and still there is more production. A million acres a year are lost to urbanization, and production climbs. There is a continual decline in the variety of germ plasm, and therefore our major crops are increasingly vulnerable to pests and diseases,

yet production climbs. There is less water for irrigation in our aquifers, and yet more total water is being pumped, contributing to an increase in production.⁹

It's hard to see the human consequences of this slow environmental starvation without spending time in an agricultural community like East Freeman, where farmers are consistently forced to decide between what they know is better environmental stewardship and what they know will get them enough money to pay the bills. The rise in production that Jackson describes has forced small farmers into competition with their larger, expansion-oriented counterparts. Overproduction, be it of grain, produce, or meat, keeps market prices low, and low prices work fine for large-scale farmers who have plenty of product to sell. For those with farms of less than a few hundred acres, and/or small herds of livestock, low prices can mean so little profit that farming becomes less about making a living and more about breaking even. What choices does a small farmer have when faced with this scenario? From an economic perspective, the logical thing to do is to abandon practices of crop rotation, having fallow years for land to rest, and chemical-free pest control—practices that prevent soil erosion and pollution but produce less yield than the so-called “conventional” models. Forcing the land into higher yield is a short-term bargain with clear long-term environmental consequences. It's also an extremely painful strategy for a farmer who loves his or her land.

One phenomenon that has changed farming life in East Freeman especially is the relatively new growth in the size of livestock operations in their area. Up until recent years, livestock was a—if not the—primary source of income for most East Freeman farmers. It is a kind of farming that makes sense in eastern South Dakota, where the dry

⁹ Jackson, Wes. “The Failure of Success.” in *New Roots for Agriculture*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), 14.

climate makes it difficult to grow reliable crops of cash grain (meaning grain sold for human consumption). Farmers would invest in herds of cattle and hogs, then feed their crops to the animals. They grew primarily corn and good grazing crops, like alfalfa. When the animals were the right size for slaughter, they were sold. Now, though, with beef and pork prices too low for farmers like these to profit, people are increasingly prone to abandon livestock for cash grain farming.

To go from livestock to cash grain changes the rhythm of a farmer's life considerably. Animals demand year-round attention; in the winter months, most grain just needs time to grow. This is not to say that farmers are suddenly left with nothing to do—farm work is always full of loose ends that need tying—but it does free up time, and people increasingly use that time to bring in more income. As I stated before, cash grain farming in South Dakota comes with no guarantees, so supplemental income is especially welcome. Jim Graber explained the situation to me from a farmer's perspective:

Just in the last three or four years, this community was heavily into livestock farming. You know, you did—you raised your crops, you fed it. Which tied you down a lot. But the economics of particularly hog production, has gotten, you know, it's economy of scale, you've got to have three, five, ten thousand head. And most people here are not choosing to go through that route. So I think if you go to cash grain farming, you're going to see more and more people employed elsewhere in the winter months, from November to March, or whatever. ... we've got families where one of the spouses commutes to Sioux Falls, to Yankton; not at all uncommon. Fifteen years ago, very unusual.

He went on to describe the impact that these extra jobs have had on the church community:

It changed some of the functions in the church. Whether it's Bible school, or—we haven't had men's groups here, that's never caught on—but there have been women's organizations in churches. The only people that are there at this point are the people who are sixty and seventy years old and retired. Bible school teachers, Sunday school teachers, male or female; it's tough to find them. Because they're working.

The Ortman's: A Family Case Study

When I am in Freeman, I always stay with Will and Sherilyn Ortman, the young farming couple that my husband and I both know from college. Will grew up in Freeman on the same farm that he now shares with his parents and brother and sister-in-law. He graduated from college with a double major in psychology and music composition. His wife, Sherilyn, majored in music performance (piano) and German. Will's family was not expecting him to become a farmer, and both he and Sherilyn were ideal candidates for graduate school, so they surprised his parents by announcing, when they finished college, that they wanted to come to Freeman and share in the family farm. I have heard from Will's aunt (and whether this is fact or apocryphal tale I am not sure, but I suspect it's fact) that the minute Will and Sherilyn pulled up in the drive on return from their honeymoon, they ran straight out to their strawberry patch, without even going inside first, to begin pulling up weeds.

From my time with the Ortman's, I've observed that this level of work ethic is just the beginning of what they have needed to keep their heads above the water (financially speaking). They've also needed creativity, ingenuity, and a willingness to take major risks. Will and Sherilyn live on a three-house farmstead; their next-door neighbors are Will's parents, Arlen and Ellen. His older brother Stan, sister-in-law Gwen, and their three children live in on the other side of Arlen and Ellen's house. Corn and soybeans are their main crops. All three families have beef cattle, but this isn't enough to sustain any of the families given the present difficulties with the meat market. When Will and Sherilyn first settled in on the Ortman farm, eggs were a primary source of income for the

families. Everyone shared in the chicken house chores and shared the income that came from selling the eggs. Within a few years of the couple's arrival, there was no longer any profit coming from the farm's egg business. This was a situation similar to the one in hog farming described by Jim—corporations and large-scale chicken operations had flooded the market and prices dropped so low that small farmers were driven out of business. The Ortman's gave up their chickens, keeping just enough to provide eggs for their families, and began to look for other means of earning income.

This is where risk-taking came in. Will and Sherilyn were young and childless, with few big investments tying them down, so they were in a good position to try new ideas. Their chemical-free strawberry and raspberry business was already well underway; next they began researching hydroponic farming. Hydroponic farming is relatively new in the United States; it involves growing fruits and vegetables in mineral-enriched water rather than soil. Because it is done indoors, it's especially appealing in areas that experience short growing seasons and hard winters. After investigating the possibilities, Will and Sherilyn took out a loan and invested in the equipment needed to convert a part of the old chicken house to a hydroponic greenhouse. This included an elaborate system of water pipes, many pounds of minerals that had to be added to the water to duplicate the mineral balance found in soil, and ultraviolet lights to duplicate the effects of sunlight.¹⁰ Because they were the first people in the community to try hydroponics, they had little to guide them but their own research.

¹⁰ Some hydroponic farms use greenhouses and take advantage of natural sunlight. Farmers in northern climates don't have this option, however, as the days of winter are far too short to provide enough sunlight.

During my summer 2002 visit, they were in an experimental stage. They had owned the equipment for a few months, and their main crop was tomatoes. The former chicken house was now a forest of tomato vines stretching from buckets on the floor to the ceiling. There was also some lettuce coming up, and a few smaller experiments with cucumbers and green beans. Will and Sherilyn were investigating local markets for places to sell the produce, and some local grocery stores were showing interest, although they hadn't sold much yet. From the way they were talking, I could tell that their hopes were extremely high, but that they were prepared for some initial failures—and for people thinking they were crazy. Will's father, for instance, seemed to look on the venture with friendly but earnest skepticism.

Much of what they were learning at this point involved trial and error. For instance, having heard that bees could aid in the cross-pollination of hydroponic tomatoes (the lack of insect wildlife has both pros and cons for hydroponic farmers), Will released a gang of their own honeybees in the greenhouse. Rather than performing the hoped-for function, the bees flew in pathetic circles about a foot above the floor, and gradually died. (I am usually very cautious around bees, but one look at these pitiful creatures told me I had nothing to fear from them.) After the sad failure of the honeybees, Will ordered some bumblebees by mail. This ended my personal visits to the greenhouse, but I'm told they weren't much better at the task. Will learned not to bother with bees.

Between this and other minor setbacks, the tomatoes weren't a big success. But Will and Sherilyn thought on their feet, and switched their emphasis to culinary herbs and salad greens, while keeping the tomatoes going on a smaller scale. This has proven considerably more profitable; they made contact with some chefs at upscale restaurants in

Sioux Falls, and consequently now have buyers for all the produce they grow. They make enough from the operation to cover the monthly payment on their loan. They aren't operating anywhere near full capacity, yet, either—there's still plenty of room in the old chicken house for more produce, and Will especially is constantly trying out new ideas. When my husband and I visited in April of 2003, Will showed us seedlings of various tropical fruit trees that he was experimenting with. With significant Asian immigrant populations in Sioux Falls, it's entirely possible that Will and Sherilyn can find the market for foods that they couldn't sell in the immediate Freeman area. Their solution to the small-farm conundrum, by and large, has been to focus on finding clientele that care about the quality and source of their produce (such as gourmet chefs) and grow food that will appeal to them. In the future, they may well also be able to capitalize on their capacity to grow foods that are not generally mass-produced in this country.

The kind of unconventional gamble that Will and Sherilyn took to start their growhouse is a much less feasible option for people with children. Will's elder brother Stan and sister-in-law Gwen were also reliant on the egg income. Gwen was my exercise partner in Freeman; we had many evening walks together talking about the state of farms and farming. Since the loss of their egg income, they have faced what is a common struggle for small farmers in that area: barely making ends meet and worrying about how they will fund the educations of their children, all of whom attend the private Freeman Academy. Cayley, their oldest, is just a few years away from college.

On one walk, Gwen said that she thanks God for every day that they are still on the farm. From Gwen, as well as the other farmers I interacted with in East Freeman, I ascertained a major reason why so many farmers with every conceivable reason to give

up will keep going—they love it. They feel that growing food is their life's work. (Gwen's son Cayley has inherited the passion; he has hopes of farming on the family land himself. "I love this state, I love my community, I love my church, I love this farm. Mind you, coming back and farming ... might not be an option, but I'd love to come back to this farm," he said in an interview.) Gwen is an astute political observer and feels strongly that the agricultural system is fretted with injustice. She commented on one occasion how frustrating it was to see the larger-scale farmers in town who relied on chemicals and treated their land poorly thrive while her family invested so much time in more ecological farming practices with so little financial payoff. "We just feel forgotten out here," she said one evening. She didn't need to read Wendell Berry to reach similar conclusions about popular indifference to the small farmer's plight.

Despite these realizations, Gwen doesn't talk like a helpless victim. Rather, she gives the impression of being well aware of her challenges and her oppressors. She resists them by resisting the despair they could easily cause her, and by staying away from despair, she's better able to envision a future for her family on their land, rather than regarding as inevitable the sale of their farm to a profiteering landowner with corporate ties. Perhaps the root of this optimism is faith. The collective spiritual momentum of such small farmers as Gwen and the others on the Ortman farmstead, coupled with their ingenuity, will be a constant challenge to the hegemony of agribusiness.

Driving past dry fields on the way to church Sunday mornings, then coming in to hymns full of images of fountains and abundance, the magnitude of spiritual resistance slowly sunk in for me. The bottom line of this chapter is the very simple and age-old assertion that such resistance makes a difference. Without wading into theological

terrain—others can argue over the effectiveness of prayer and singing in affecting actual change—I’ll at least flirt with the maudlin in asserting what I saw powerfully demonstrated in East Freeman: singing hymns (and praying collective prayers, and other aspects of the service) saves people from the full force of despair and isolation. If others have forgotten the East Freeman farmers (and people like them), the words of their hymns indicate a belief that God, at least, has not. In the midst of economic lack and drought, they can still sing a hymn with the words, “Come, thou fount of ev’ry blessing.”¹¹ Portraying the divine with water imagery speaks to literal need. Yet the hymn moves on, out of the prison of literal need to the metaphors that, at least partially, can answer it.

¹¹ Sung July 14, 2002 in the North Church.

Chapter 4: How Freeman Academy is Singing for its Life

Question (*posed by the Freeman Courier, town newspaper*):

Would you like to come back to Freeman to live?

Selected answers (*from Freeman high school seniors*):

"No, because I want to live in a bigger city and don't want to have to drive 50 miles to Sioux Falls to buy clothes, go out to eat, go to entertainment, etc. It's a nice town, but I want more job opportunities."

"Yes, come back and farm or work as an educator."

"Mixed feelings—with the uncertainty of the school I am not sure what the community would be like when I come back."

"No, I have had fun living here but I want a place where you don't have to have a certain name for people to accept you."

"Yes, it is a nice place to raise a family because of its small, friendly environment."

"I do not think I will come back to Freeman to live because I believe I can get a better job elsewhere. I think living somewhere else would give me more of a chance to meet people that do not judge me so much."

"No! There are no businesses anymore, people gossip and everyone supports the academy and not the public school. Oh yeah Flyers rule."

"Yes, we are better than everyone."

"Yes, I want to live in a small town."

"Yes, it's a great town. I love it."

—from "Freeman in Print: 100 Years as Recorded by the Freeman Courier." May 1, 2002.

Small-town survival is unavoidably linked to schools. The main reason is simple: schools are where the young people are, and their experiences in school shape their impressions of the town and its viability as a future home. A town without a school (or with a very poor one) is considerably disadvantaged in attracting residents, new or returning. These truths haunt small-town residents throughout the country, as budget shortfalls force small districts closer to consolidation or closure.

There are a number of survival issues at play in the town of Freeman. On the surface, it might seem that Freeman residents have more educational security than many—from junior high school on, they have two different options for their children, the public schools and the private, Mennonite academy. In some ways, though, the existence

of two school systems within this one small town just gives people more things to worry about. Both the public school system and the Academy are in trouble financially.

Freeman Public Schools suffer from the same state budget cuts that are affecting other small districts in South Dakota (a situation that seems to only get worse with the ever-faltering economy), and Freeman Academy faces record lows in enrollment. In the same special feature issue of the Freeman Courier as the epigraph quotes, Freeman Public Schools superintendent Don Hotchkiss is quoted saying, “There has got to be economic development, or not only will the schools die, but the community will shrivel up and become non-factors, too [*sic*].”¹ Economic development, for all the reasons detailed in the previous chapter and more, is terribly slow in today’s rural communities.

For the Mennonites in the area, the precarious situation of the schools, particularly Freeman Academy, underlines their own worries about maintaining their way of life. In this chapter, I discuss how the prospect of a dying Academy affects the musical life of the East Freeman community and how more than ever people are turning to music as a spiritual and practical response to the situation. The fate of the Freeman Academy is of particular concern, as many of the Mennonites send their children there and value the religious (and musical) component of their education. The Academy, together with its sister school, Freeman Junior College—now closed—was conceived by its founders as a way of ensuring that their identity and values would be passed on to the younger generation of Mennonites.² Beginning at the turn of the last century, it has continued to

¹ “Freeman in Print: 100 Years as Recorded by the Freeman Courier.” May 1, 2002, pg. 24.

² Marie J. Waldner and Marnette D. Hofer, *Many Hands, Minds and Hearts: A History of Freeman Junior College and Freeman Academy 1900-2000*. (Freeman, SD: Freeman Academy, 2000), 1.

serve this function although the original goal of preserving German as the primary teaching language did fall by the wayside.

Starting schools, whether colleges or private grade schools, was a means for Mennonite immigrants to get a firm foothold in the places they were living. A school kept young people within the fold and kept them Mennonite—they were less likely to be swallowed up by a world unsympathetic, or at the very least unaware, of the values that made them separate. There are Mennonite high schools and/or colleges in almost every major Mennonite settlement in the country. They have been an extremely effective survival strategy, for their graduates are far more likely to remain in Mennonite churches.³

The promotion of Mennonite schools today may constitute a continuation of the ancestors' survival strategy, but the values taught in the schools have evolved along with Mennonite values in general. The demise of literal separatism and the growth of the Mennonite service ethic, brought about in part by the wars of the twentieth century and young men's need for alternatives to military duty, wrought considerable change on Mennonite schools and Mennonites in general. Whereas the schools once protected insularity and defined the borders of Mennonite communities, a number of them now work towards a conscientious global awareness. Jim Graber describes the effect on Freeman:

In some ways it is really closed and tight, but at the same time, especially when there was a college here, there were teachers who came from elsewhere, constant flow of people from other communities. I think that has made a significant difference for the whole community ... there are some things that I think, even though it's just a Mennonite network—I shouldn't say just a Mennonite network,

³ *The Mennonite Mosaic: Identity and Modernization* covers this and a wide range of education-related issues as they pertain to Mennonites.

the Mennonite network is a particular network—but it is a worldwide one. And the flow of people on and off this campus who are brought in to talk to kids, to do seminars or whatever, it still exposes kids to a world bigger than Freeman, at least. It may be the bigger Mennonite world, which is not the whole world, by any means, but it is a world bigger than just this community. And I think that's significant.

The ironic aspect of this global promotion is that while it may burst open some boundaries for Mennonite students and even furnish them with international opportunities, it can seal the boundaries at home, which leads to Mennonite insularity of a very different sort than the original settlers had. For instance, my home town contains both a politically liberal, globally aware Mennonite college and a politically conservative, non-Mennonite population, with a strong cultural divide between the two. I can point to the instances in my time there where two different brands of insularity came into active conflict, the Gulf War being the most memorable. My parents can point to others: the Vietnam War and more recently, 9/11 and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Reductionist dichotomies fly from both sides: patriot versus anti-patriot, uneducated versus educated, down-home versus snob.

Freeman has had similar tensions. Without understanding all the reasons why (it would take much more time in the community to do so), I noticed a strong current of rivalry and even, at times, antagonism between the public school system and the Academy. As stated before, both of these schools are desperate for funds. They also compete for students, at least indirectly. (Being Mennonite does not automatically mean a student is sent to the Academy; in fact, I was told that most of the students in the Salem youth group were public school attendees.) This competition takes its toll on members of the community, particularly those who straddle the divide between the Mennonite

community and the public school system. One person told me tiredly that she wished everyone would just stop their bickering and get along.

The question beneath the rivalry, perhaps, is whether Freeman is big enough to support two school systems. And if it's not, which one is going to make it? Some Academy supporters I have spoken with feel, understandably, that the demise of their school would probably be a death knell for the Mennonite presence in the community. They have already lost one school, Freeman Junior College. It closed in 1986, when a budget shortfall made continuation of both the college and the Academy impossible, and the closing was mourned.⁴

It is the musical presence of the Academy that has most defined it, both in the Freeman community and in the Mennonite world, and great music is thus part of what the community fears losing. When asked why music was so important to the community, almost every person I interviewed pointed to the Academy as the source of it. Speaking with Academy students, it wasn't hard to see why. "We look upon choir as an important thing, you know, it's like, more important than the basketball team, almost. You know, you can't say there's too many places like that," said one. Another added, "I think the people who don't like singing feel awkward when we break into song! ... It's the exact opposite of what it's like in a lot of other places."⁵ Graduates of the Academy feed into the community's musical life; they also bring music to other parts of the Mennonite world, cementing Freeman's reputation as a musical center. Several of the music faculty

⁴ Waldner and Hofer, 172.

⁵ None of this is to imply that the Freeman Public Schools don't have good choirs. Their high school in particular, I've heard, has a very good one, directed by a Freeman Academy alumnus.

members at my college alma mater were graduates and/or former faculty members of the Academy and the Freeman Junior College.

Despite uncertain prospects, ambitious musical projects continue in Freeman, laying the groundwork for what many hope will be another generation of vibrant musical life. Good music seems to be the herald of a healthy community in East Freeman, one that has a good chance of enduring; the presence of music indicates that people have the economic means and the physical and emotional energy to take time making it. Much depends on young people who have left the community for college and made the conscious decision to return.

New Music, Small-Town Celebrities, and a Future for Freeman Academy

The first rehearsal for Will Ortman's oratorio, "Jesus, the Man, the Christ," was in the Fellowship Hall of the North Church. The North Church has no air-conditioning, and on this July evening the heat was stifling. Fans were set up around the room, which made it too noisy for anyone beyond the front row to really hear what was going on. Aside from that, though, the atmosphere was lively. At least fifty people were there, and it was clear that they were curious to see what Will had composed. This was the first time he himself had heard any of the oratorio, composed over the last few years, sung by a large choir. (His extended family had gathered at Christmas to make a preliminary recording.) Will was so nervous beforehand that he couldn't even eat supper. It didn't help that he was still working frantically to print scores—he did them all from his own computer, going through buckets of printer ink in the process—until right before we left for the rehearsal. Will was also edgy about the fact that he had never really conducted

anything before, and he was conducting the oratorio. He and Sherilyn had considered having her conduct, as she is more experienced, but Will needed her at the keyboard. His score was for piano and organ—at rehearsals, Sherilyn played the full score on piano.

Despite Will's doubts, real music was happening from the outset of the rehearsal. It was clear that his choir, all volunteers, knew how to sightread; in fact, the first piece in the oratorio went so well that I had goosebumps. The choir was full of terrific singers. Their tone was centered and warm, they had vibratos that added richness to the sound without obstructing the pitch, and no one seemed to struggle overmuch with the harmony. They sang as though they had been in choirs all their lives, which, of course, most of them had. Afterwards, Will admitted that he had nearly cried from relief. He wasn't expecting it to go so well so quickly. His greatest challenge would be reigning in the chatter; people were having almost too much of a good time.

I had placed myself by Sherilyn as a page-turner in order not to feel useless, but I did more watching than helping. Most striking to me was the age range of the choir. There were kids who couldn't be more than fifteen or sixteen sitting next to middle-aged people, as well as plenty of singers over sixty, even over seventy. Each one of these people had agreed to meet for rehearsals twice a week with no financial compensation, and some, Will later told me, even asked him if they should pay him a fee or somehow help to financially support his project. In an interview several weeks later, I asked Will what Freeman's greatest musical asset was, and he mentioned again the generosity of his choir:

I think actually the greatest musical asset—this will sound strange, but the greatest musical asset is not really actually related to music, but rather the fact that people have an attitude about music that's positive and gives them the willingness to participate in it. Because if they didn't have that, there wouldn't be

the talent that there is. I think the talent that's here and the abilities and the music that's here is a direct result of people thinking to themselves, 'Well, I can sing, so I'm going to sing. I'm not going to just shelve it and pretend I can't sing, I'm going to use it.' I think there's a lot of places where people have abilities that they never use, and so they kind of—as a result of people not using those abilities, they don't have the opportunities to, either. It really is an endless cycle. As long as, you know—if I knew that people weren't willing to get together—you know, spend two nights a week, in the middle of summer, during travel season, whatnotall, to do this, than I wouldn't have presented the opportunity to do it, either. So it all connects. And then from that, from the willingness to perform, and take part in stuff, they develop their abilities more and more, and enjoy them more, and they teach their children to too, because of that, you know. In my oratorio choir there's a lot of parents of kids, you know, high school-age, college-age kids that are in there too, and it becomes kind of a family tradition to do stuff like that. And so I think that's the greatest musical asset. The—and you know, honestly a lot of that does—it does stem back to the Academy in a lot of ways, because the Academy, being a private institution, and kind of ... always struggling financially, there's a lot of volunteering that has to happen for the school to continue going. And because of that, there's just kind of an attitude of volunteering that people learn. And so then volunteering for something like this is not odd for them. Whereas I think, if you contrast it even with the local public school, you know, parents aren't used to volunteering for things, and so it's harder to get those people to volunteer for stuff like this, too. And it's really kind of interesting, I think.

It is, as Will explained, due in large part to the Academy's influence that Freeman is still a place where an up-and-coming young composer/farmer can recruit a volunteer choir of fifty people to sing an original oratorio and then present it to a nearly full house. His oratorio is a concrete example of the kind of musical community building that East Freemanites do by second nature, and its effect will probably be far-reaching. Will's motivation to create feeds the community's motivation to sing, and reminds them that they *are* a community that can create wonderful art, despite the economic and cultural challenges they face. (The oratorio has already gone on the road—it has been performed in both Kansas and at the 2003 national Mennonite Church U.S.A. conference in Atlanta. Will is looking for a publisher.)

In Chapter 1, I observed how powerfully one individual can affect the shape of musical traditions in Freeman. Will and Sherilyn were among the strongest examples of this phenomenon that I saw there. I first met Sherilyn when we were both eighteen, our freshman year at Bethel College in North Newton, Kansas. Together, we made up the entirety of the freshman class in the Bethel music department, both of us performance majors, she on piano, myself on flute. Sherilyn was from the rural area near Mount Pleasant, Iowa. She graduated from a private Mennonite high school and arrived at Bethel focused on church music (a focus later altered when she discovered an intense distaste for playing the organ). I arrived focused on anything but church, but despite our differences, we paired up naturally as musicians and performed together throughout college. From the beginning, Sherilyn was a rock-solid accompanist and a true musical partner. All of my college recitals were accompanied by her. Her own solo recitals were stupendous.

At Bethel, a small Mennonite liberal arts school (enrollment at that time hovered near six hundred), students with the capabilities for graduate study are actively encouraged in that direction by their professors, as was Sherilyn. She planned on it for a time, even auditioning for and being accepted into graduate programs in performance and pedagogy. Eventually, though, she decided against it. She was marrying Will, and the two of them wanted to move to Freeman and farm. They caught no end of flack for this decision—the social pressure at Bethel for career achievement rivals the social pressure to get married—but they stuck to their druthers.

In East Freeman, however, they were welcomed, their talents immediately put to practical use. Most likely, they are exactly what East Freeman needed at that moment:

young, risk-taking, energetic people with lots of talent and commitment to church, sustainable farming, music, the Academy, and general community involvement. I was slightly amazed at the minor celebrity status that the two of them seemed to have achieved. Between a short stint teaching German at the Academy and her many piano students, Sherilyn has already affected the lives of more children than she can count. When she played Nancy in a spring performance of the musical *Oliver!*, she commented to me that she could barely get by the adoring throngs of little chorus girls backstage—a comment made with tired affection and not a trace of arrogance.⁶ Likewise, her talents are honored in the Salem-Zion church, where she serves from time to time as chorister—a tradition that has ebbed in and out of the church’s history, revived by her. In that capacity, she has already expanded the congregation’s hymn repertoire, introducing people to things in their hymnal that they have never sung before, and given the guidance needed to sing these hymns well. Like Will’s aunt Mavis, who has directed generations of choir members in both the Salem-Zion church choir and the area children’s choir, she is becoming one of the people that everyone points to as a musical “pillar of the community,” someone with a tremendous amount of influence and the good graces to use it well. People seem to love her all the more for the fact that she isn’t a native Freemanite and yet shows unwavering commitment to them. She came up frequently in interviews.

Will and Sherilyn are affecting the community’s future in another very tangible way—through their participation in Freeman Academy’s Creative Arts Committee, a

⁶ The musical was part of a large Mennonite food and music festival, Schmeckfest, that the Academy sponsors every year. A musical is always part of the festivities, which attract people from states away. Schmeckfest could easily be the subject of an entire chapter of a thesis on Freeman, but unfortunately, while I attended the 2003 festival, I haven’t done adequate fieldwork to write that chapter.

group of people that has been instrumental in planning a new direction for the school that they hope will save it. A former school administrator, Larry Horner, hatched an idea in 2000 to turn the Academy's focus to the arts, following the model of the Interlochen Arts Academy in Michigan. The Creative Arts Committee helped work out the details of the idea, planning new courses, a block schedule, and publicity for their transformed Academy.

While the school will retain its Mennonite affiliation and religious instruction, hopes are high that the new format will attract students outside of the Mennonite fold. In rural South Dakota, where budget cuts are forcing public school arts programs into crisis or extinction, the revitalized Academy could easily bring in students gifted in theater, visual arts, and music whose needs are not met in the public schools of their hometowns. Within the Mennonite world, the school may be able to attract those outside of the Freeman area if its reputation grows. An old dorm from the Freeman Junior College is being remodeled to house out-of-town students, a gesture of hope that those students will come.

The changes to the Freeman Academy—and the open question as to whether they will keep the school alive—are a sign of a new direction in Mennonite survival tactics. Separatism, the old way of being and staying Mennonite, is still breaking down, melting into an elusive balance of assimilating and maintaining distinctiveness, riding on the waves of an outside culture that can't be productively ignored. In the case of Freeman Academy and the people who love it, it may be the things that make them most distinctive that help them to find their niche in those waves, and thus to survive.

Conclusion

When I returned to Freeman this past spring to attend the annual “Schmeckfest,” Freeman Academy’s food and music festival, I was struck by how much I still felt like a stranger there. Faced with mobs of people as they crowded into the tiny chapel to hear the Academy choir, standing in line for the traditional heavy, Mennonite meal, and packed into rooms full of Mennonite culture displays and momentos of past performances, I felt overwhelmed. A few weeks in this town and some sustained friendships there had proven barely enough for me to scratch the surface of its culture. Insider though I may be in an ethnic sense, I felt a complete outsider in so many ways. Here I was, a lactose-intolerant vegetarian who hates crowds sitting at a massive, packed table in an auditorium basement that was practically buckling with German sausage and creamy sauces. These foods were comfort and heritage to most of the people here, but for me they just spelled one big stomachache. What else wasn’t I getting? I’m sure there was plenty, but I didn’t feel like asking questions anymore. I was content to watch people, not be noticed, and simply take in the scenes around me.

It wasn’t too difficult. Everyone was busy with some aspect of the festival, and some of my old consultants didn’t even recognize me—I had glasses and my hair had changed. I did enjoy seeing people I knew in the musical, and the vibrant Academy campus that I had seen before only in its dormant summer state. I was more comfortable on Sunday morning, when my husband and I went to Salem-Zion with Will and Sherilyn. We heard the choir, directed by Mavis—something I had missed completely in the summer, it being out of session then. Pastor Engbrecht spoke and people sang hymns.

The service reminded me of why I had come to Freeman in the first place. The festival was important—it nurtured Mennonite identity, brought in funds for the Academy, and was a highlight of the year for Mennonites and non-Mennonites of the area alike. Still, it was the power behind the congregational singing that sustained people throughout the year. Because I did the bulk of my fieldwork during a terribly ordinary time, with no pageantry or even a choir concert to break the routine, my thesis reflects that ordinariness. It contains my interpretation of day-to-day survival in East Freeman, and sometimes uses my own previous knowledge of Mennonite life as a reference point. I hope that in doing so, I have been as true as possible to the insights that my generous consultants—and all of the Freeman singers—have shared with me.

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