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SOPHIA

W I S D O M

*Say to Wisdom, "You are my sister."
Proverbs 7:4a*



Transitions

FALL 1998 ■ VOLUME 8 ■ NUMBER 3

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SOPHIA

A Greek feminine noun associated with the biblical wisdom tradition, translated "wisdom" and personified in the book of Proverbs; equivalent in the New Testament to *logos*, the creative word that was with God in the beginning, creating and giving life to the world.

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Don't miss our next issue!

Please renew your subscription promptly. Make cheques payable to *Sophia* and send to our address, left.

Remaining 1998 themes include: December - Women Adventurers.

Donations to the ongoing work of *Sophia* are gratefully received. For a tax receipt, please make cheques to DeFehr Foundation (undesignated, please) and send them to our address with a letter requesting the funds to be used for *Sophia*.

Cover: The cover photos are of Helena at the time she was separated from her family, and at age 90. (See "A Letter to My Granddaughter," page 12.)

Gone West

by Donna Stewart / Maryann Tjart Jantzen

It was with sadness I had to announce, in the spring of 1993, my withdrawal from the board of *Sophia*, since we were moving to Vancouver.

"We'll just make you our Western Correspondent," Lori Matties told me. This seemed a valid possibility since we had already discussed ways of expanding our representation to include writing from other areas of North America. Although this didn't happen, I did receive, in the fall of 1997, notification of a Board decision to publish one issue a year from a particular region of Canada.

That's how I became a joyful member of the British Columbia *Sophia* Committee, working with Janet Boldt, Lois Klassen, Maryann Tjart Jantzen and Lora Sawatsky. This issue is an adventure. We are amazed that the Winnipeg Board has trusted us with so much freedom. They sent the message, "Choose your own theme; write as many of the columns as you want. Call on us for whatever you need. Here's a list of subscribers and suggestions for potential writers."

We are aware we have a high standard to maintain, and we hope we've not fallen far short. Janet and I laugh in retrospect about the first time we met a few years ago, at a course on gender mutuality sponsored by Columbia Bible College and MCC Women's Concerns, when we rejoiced over the latest issue of *Sophia*. "It's such a wonderful magazine," Janet exclaimed, "and to think that it comes from Winnipeg!" (Janet has since come to love and appreciate Winnipeg.)

Although this issue originates in British Columbia, it has a perceptible Winnipeg influence. Lora Sawatsky, Maryann Tjart Jantzen and I have all

lived in Winnipeg for extended periods, and some of the other writers have attended college there. So

perhaps we aren't as close to our earlier goal of creating a "BC original" as we thought! Perhaps there's a "perceptible Winnipeg influence" everywhere in North American Mennonite land!

Donna Stewart

When Donna asked me to be on the BC *Sophia* committee, I was hesitant, having learned from hard experience the personal cost of adding new responsibilities to my already full schedule. But I did say yes eventually, and my excitement and satisfaction have steadily grown as I've edited the articles in this issue, marvelling at the richness of women's perspectives and experiences.

We've focused on transitions in women's lives: both the many transitions that we experience as women and the process of making successful transitions. There are probably as many transitions in individual women's lives as there are women in our readership. We've tried to present different angles of vision, diverse experiences and varieties of wisdom, hoping that together these will reflect on and encourage you in your own transitions.

Included are several narratives exploring the Russian Mennonite immigrant experience of the past and an interview with a recent immigrant to Canada. Being exposed to the difficult transitions of these women gives us perspective as we process our own changes. We've also focused on changes coinciding with various stages of life,

and we have included experiences of both sorrow and satisfaction. Through prose and poetry, reflection and report, we've tried to create a rich tapestry of life. I hope you find your own life experiences reflected on these pages and that you are encouraged as you read about the experiences of others.

It's been a privilege to edit the articles in this issue and to work with such a helpful and collegial committee. Much thanks to Donna for her leadership, to Lois for all her wonderful ideas and to Lora and Janet for hunting down and procuring the accompanying photographs. And a special thanks to all the BC writers who contributed: without you this issue would not have been possible.

Maryann Tjart Jantzen

Editor's note: It is with sadness that Sophia says goodbye to two valued members. Eleanor Martens has been with the magazine from the beginning as author of our "As I see It" column and as Associate Editor. We offer her best wishes in her new position as Nurse Coordinator at Hope Centre, a community health clinic in Winnipeg's inner city. We also say goodbye to Darlene Loewen, who has done an excellent job of circulation. Darlene and her husband and two boys have moved to Ontario. Many thanks to you both.

Congratulations to the women on the BC Committee for putting together a fine issue! And please note, our new writer's contest deadline has been extended, see p 23.



Back l-r: Maryann Tjart Jantzen, Lois Klassen, Donna Stewart. Front l-r: Janet Boldt, Lora Sawatsky.



FROM THE SOURCE

"Whither thou goest ..."

by Lorraine Dick

Most of us find change uncomfortable. A small amount is manageable, but often life hands us unexpected circumstances. Or we are faced with premature transitions. Change, even wanted change, unsettles our spirits. Yet, we are also aware that without change life would be boring.

I would like to look at two examples of biblical women who faced difficult transitions. The first one, Naomi, had change thrust on her by life circumstances. As happened periodically, a severe drought plagued the land. Faced with starvation, Naomi's family chose to move outside of Israel to the land of Moab. They established themselves there, finding work and becoming part of the culture. All was going well when suddenly Naomi's husband, Elimelech, died.

Suddenly, her source of support and stability was gone. The move to Moab had been intended to make life easier, not harder. Now she was left alone with her sons. They grew older and in time took wives of their own. I'm sure that she looked forward to grandchildren. To hear the voices of children in her home would have been a welcome change. But it was not to be. Before any children arrived, both her sons died.

Once again, Naomi was forced into a difficult, unexpected transition. Now she, a foreigner, and her widowed Moabite daughters-in-law were on their own.

Naomi decided to make a change she could control – to move home to Israel. Together, she and her daughters-in-law left Moab. On the way Naomi must have begun to think

about what she had felt like leaving her homeland so long ago. She had not been ready to leave all that was familiar. As they moved toward Israel, Naomi asked the young women to return to their homes. This change would be too great for them. They needed to be with their family and friends where they would be more likely to find new husbands. They needed to remain where they were familiar with culture, language and history.

Naomi must have been a very kind mother-in-law. Her daughters-in-

*Change, even wanted
change, unsettles
our spirits.*

law did not want to leave her. They sobbed and begged her to let them come along. But Naomi spoke forcefully. She told them her womb could produce no more husbands for them. "Please go back," she said. "Go to your mothers – go to your kin people and live there" (see Ruth 1:8-13).

Orpah finally gave in and returned to her people. But Ruth determined to stay with Naomi.

Here we find the second example of facing change. Ruth looked at her life situation and chose to make a transition. She chose to change country, family and religion. Still young, she could have gone back with Orpah and probably found another husband. But I think her heart had been softened toward God. She did not want to live at home without Naomi. She did not want to continue with her ances-

tral gods. As persuasively as she could, she told Naomi: "Where you go, I want to go. Where you live, I want to live. The people you call your own, I want to be my people. And your God shall be my God" (see Ruth 1:16).

Choosing change, for Ruth, meant that she would leave behind what her life had been. She saw the opportunities ahead of her and wanted what her mother-in-law had. She saw that she could live differently from the way she had lived before.

Two women – two examples of change. Both had change thrust into their lives. Both had to deal with the pain of unexpected transitions. One coped by making a deliberate choice to remove herself from a difficult situation. The other chose to make a transition to a better situation.

Change is about difference. Sometimes we can choose change and sometimes it's unceremoniously dumped upon us. Sometimes we can prepare for it and sometimes we cannot. But whether we expect change or not – God goes before all change. The comfort in the midst of our change is that God does not change:

God is not a human being ... that
he should change his mind.
Has he promised, and will he not
do it?

Has he spoken, and will he not
fulfill it?

Numbers 23:19 (NRSV)

Lorraine Dick graduated from MB Biblical Seminary, Fresno, California, in 1988. She has pastored in Waterloo, Ontario, and Langley, BC, where she is now pastor of Christian Education at South Langley Mennonite Brethren Church.

Learning to Grow

by Donna Stewart

One of the keys to a happy life is learning how to manage transitions: knowing when to let go and when to move on through whatever doors God opens.

I vividly remember a woman who told me that she cried all the time during her first year of marriage. When I asked why, she replied, "First I'd been a princess, the only child in a well-to-do family, then the bride in the shining dress, the centre of attention, and then there I was – home alone all day, scrubbing floors." When I asked what happened at the end of that year, she responded, "Oh, then I had a baby and I grew up."

She didn't do too well on that first transition from bride to wife, but she aced the second, from wife to mother. She didn't yet know that there'd be dozens more changes: from mother-of-a-cute-baby to mother-of-a-get-into-everything toddler to mother-of-two (one in the little lawyer phase) and so on – to mother-of-silent- (or combative) teen to "empty-nester," mother-of-the-bride, grandmother, probably even widow.

She might change, over those years, from being a compliant sweetheart to a competent and independent household manager. Or she might find herself busy with volunteer work or paid employment. Her husband, on the other hand, might change from being the always attentive suitor to the mumbler-behind-the-paper, the preoccupied businessman, the unemployed middler, the male-menopausal-sports-car-enthusiast, or the always-underfoot retiree. Processing these myriad transitions requires endless stores of sensitivity, understanding, commitment and prayer. Both individuals in a marriage must learn to live

realistically in the present rather than in the illusions of the past.

Transitions aren't only confined to marriage. A single woman may replace Cinderella dreams with an awareness of her strengths and freedoms, the unique opportunities singleness brings. However, she too will be continually challenged by new contexts, by economic changes or changing worship and governance styles in her church.

All transitions test our faith. Can we believe that God is in charge? Can we at least believe that God is with us? We must learn new ways to grow in faith, or we will use ever more mental energy to reject change and to insist that the past was better.

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energy to reject change.*

I knew an abandoned wife who refused to believe that her husband had left. She set his place at the table every evening, waiting for him to recover from amnesia, her explanation for his absence. I hope God eventually gave her the grace to tackle realistically the transition to single parenthood.

Another woman I knew handled the same transition prayerfully, persistently willing to take back her wandering husband. Her church care group was sure she was going to be fleeced financially. She did what she thought was right – until the day a woman claiming to be her husband's mistress of thirteen years called. "Then I knew," she explained, "that my job now was to

protect my children."

Insisting on a fair financial settlement that would allow her family to stay in their own home, she took a low-paying job close to home. I remember her telling me, "It was something I could do without too much stress to get back into the workforce." The next year she started a unionized library job she loved, working with people. By paying attention to the twin realities of "what's right" and "what's possible," she negotiated a series of transitions with steady grace.

Paul says, "There is nothing I cannot master with the help of the One who gives me strength" (Phil. 4:13). Learning to be ready for transition is an enormous spiritual discipline. It goes right alongside "giving thanks in all things." We have to live honestly and prayerfully where God has placed us, with the people God has given us.

If there's a recipe for managing transitions, it must include "telling it like it is" in our prayers, so that we can be ready to receive God's help. We do not need to pretend to victories that aren't ours at the moment. In this we can follow Christ's example. The saddest transition words, "My God, My God, Why hast thou forsaken me?" came from Jesus, who declared his sense of abandonment at the same moment he affirmed his relationship with the Almighty.

.....
As wife, mother, grandmother and teacher, Donna Stewart has experienced most of the transitions mentioned in this issue, including at least half a dozen career changes and nine geographical relocations during 43 years of marriage. She attends Killarney Park MB Church in Vancouver and is the chair of MCC BC Women's Concerns Committee.

Living with *Change* and Loss

by Lois Klassen

*H*ow does one cope with change and loss in the face of life's incessant demands? Does knowing God help us to cope in difficult situations? These questions have occupied me during stressful times, especially recently when my husband was diagnosed with a serious illness.

A pre-school teacher took her charges on a field trip to a fire hall where they were instructed in survival drills. At the end of the safety tour, one of the firemen bent down to question a little girl. "What would you do if your clothes were on fire?" he asked. She replied confidently, "I wouldn't put them on!"

This child knew that her actions had consequences, and she had confidence in her ability to make wise choices. Life teaches us that our choices often have predictable outcomes. We know, for example, that if we choose to smoke we risk our health. We believe that making wise choices will produce beneficial results.

And then, quite suddenly, a catastrophe befalls us – a child's cancer diagnosis or the loss of a job. Our sense of fairness or "rightness" is challenged. We may think, "What did I ever do to deserve this?" We resist the unpleasant truth that bad things happen to good people. Our sense of bewilderment in the face of unexpected catastrophic loss may be exacerbated by the fear that God has abandoned us. We may even wonder if our circumstances are a punishment (a notion often fuelled by well-meaning but ill-advised comments such as, "God must be trying to teach you something through this").

In truth, loss is a part of life: both the subtle incremental losses that come with aging and changing roles and the more dramatic sudden losses that leave us trying to reconstruct our shattered lives. Frequently, catastrophic changes and their accompanying losses occur within the context of ordinary life. A terminal diagnosis, the loss of a job or a terrible accident happens while life's petty demands and irritations continue to clamour for attention: work awaits each morning, strangers continue to intrude, the family still needs meals and clean laundry, babies cry, teenagers act out, bills must be paid and junk mail piles up.

Learning to cope in these kinds of circumstances is not easy. It involves equally the relinquishment of what once was and the acceptance of what now is. Relinquishment and acceptance occur over time. There are few sudden victories in the business of coping, but rather, when all goes well, a gradual growth of strength and a renewed hope for living. The more significant the loss, the more time may be needed.

We ought not to fear deep emotion. Grief and accompanying strong emotions, such as anger, are part of the process, not a failure to cope. These emotions are God-given helps that allow us to heal. The well of our tears is the same well from which joy and laughter spring. If we put the lid on our tears we bottle up our capacity to enjoy life. As deeply as we are able to suffer, so deeply we are also able to rejoice. Coping begins with acknowledging our grief and the strong emotions it provokes.

When Paul wrote to the Romans, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep" (Rom 12:15), he was defining an appropriate way for Christians to love one another. This is another way in which we have been divinely equipped to cope with life's difficulties. The help and empathy we receive from others is essential to our spiritual health and one of the ways God's love is manifested to us.

However, being open to the loving care of others is sometimes difficult. We may feel ashamed of our need or humbled by our circumstances. We find it more comfortable to be the benefactor than a receiver. Yet the benefactor also often benefits greatly. By putting aside her own interests and learning to serve others, she grows less selfish and experiences the sense of purpose that comes with being truly useful to others.

Sometimes this kind of opportunity comes in the midst of personal crisis. Recently a friend from another province woke me with a phone call in the night because she had just received the devastating news that her thirteen-

year-old daughter had a potentially life-threatening disease. My own husband had been unwell for more than a year, and my family had experienced many terrifying emotional ups and downs during that time. I was glad my friend chose to call me. Her call gave me a chance to give what I had received so often – a listening ear. I felt truly included in her life, and while her problems added to my own sorrow, yet there was comfort in the depth of our understanding of each other's circumstances.

That phone call also included a request for prayer. Even though my friend would probably describe herself as an agnostic, nothing either of us could do or say answered the depth of our need at the moment. All that was left for us was an appeal to a higher power who might have mercy on us and miraculously end our suffering. And so we prayed together: I, believing that God was interested and able to help, and she believing or not (I am not willing to judge) but seeking comfort nonetheless. Prayer is another way in which we are able to cope with extreme circumstances. We say, "This is

There are few sudden victories in the business of coping.

too much for us to bear." Shaken, we place our faith in a loving God who we trust cares for us and will hear us.

Who is this God we turn to? Scripture reveals God's unchanging characteristics: love that endures forever, mercy that knows no end, justice that is incorruptible, and faithfulness that promises, "I will never leave you or forsake you" (see Ps 37:28, 94:14). When we feel the shifting sands of change threatening our stability we can remind ourselves of the one absolute: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb 13:8).

Even as I write these words, however, I am conscious they sound too glib. In my experience, the knowledge of God's unchanging nature has not always been enough to assuage my own grief. I have not always been comforted. Though tears have relieved my pent-up sorrow, the community of friends and family has supported me, and prayers, especially the prayers of others, have kept me from sinking completely into despair and helplessness, a gap still remains between how much comfort is available and how much I have been able to appropriate. This gap, I believe, corresponds to the shape and size of my alienation from a palpable relationship with the person of God. Often, for many of us, God and faith are ideas. Ideas are useful but it is not possible to have a relationship with an idea the way it is possible to have a relationship with one's own child.

For God's unchanging nature and unending love to truly sustain us in times of loss and grief we must find a way to move beyond the realm of ideas into relationship with the person of God. This is one of the reasons we are called to a life of devotion.

Lois Klassen is an elementary school teacher and writer who lives with her family in Yarrow, BC.



Rita

by Lora Sawatsky

*I'm a pilgrim, I'm a stranger
I can tarry but a while.*

Bouncing off treed mountains,
four-part harmony cascades
over water-sculpted cliffs
journeys the Fraser to oceans
over which they came.
They sing for Grandma Margarita
eulogizing her 89 years in transit.

Twice before she traveled to promised
lands.

For forty rubles Crimea's landless
left to tame Siberian steppes.
Seventeen years without crop failure,
wading knee deep in top soil
they churned with hand-crafted
ploughs,
till revolutionary armies, wading knee
deep in blood,
mowed down her straight-furrowed
lineage.

She left her first born in Siberian soil.
Born in a sod hut, daughter Margaret
lived.

Together they crossed oceans
to reclaim land from a lake,
to embroider soil with flowers,
to sew vegetables into patchwork
land,
to separate harvest by kind and color
to seal it in jars planted
in straight rows on pantry shelves.

"Her name is Nicole Rita;
Rita is for Margaret."
Airwaves carry my son's voice,
grief lurching synapse to synapse
to where it rings in Winnipeg.
Womb to sod? Seed to dust?
Your journey is too short!
Why not stay awhile?
Fill our lives with love and laughter
like the one who birthed your name.

In a forest-edged clearing
overlooking a lake still frozen
in white and bordered with pink,
eagles watch over you
and wolves howl your lullaby.

.....
*Lora Sawatsky (formerly from Winnipeg)
is a retired teacher living in Chilliwack,
BC. This poem was written in memory
of Lora's first granddaughter.*

SOPHIA Mission Statement

Sophia offers a forum for Christian women to speak to one another about the joys and challenges of living faithfully in an uncertain, changing world. Its pages give voice to women's stories – their experiences in church and society, family and workplace, their aspirations and disappointments, their successes and failures. It invites expressions of joy and sorrow, concern and outrage. In doing so it hopes to affirm women in their quest for spiritual, emotional and physical wholeness and for the full expression of their gifts in all spheres of life.

Sophia was conceived and brought to birth by Mennonite Brethren women and celebrates Christian sisterhood. Its desire is to welcome differing voices. It hopes to challenge women and men of all ages as they live together in Christian community. The name *SOPHIA* (wisdom) expresses our desire to search and know the wisdom of God through the Scriptures and our experience as followers of Jesus Christ.

Sophia acknowledges the authority of God, the giver of wisdom, and of the sacred Scriptures, the story of God's dealings with women and men. "Oh the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!" (Romans 11:33).

Reflections on Inner Change

by Maryann Tjart Jantzen

An old adage states that nothing in life is sure except death and taxes. I'd like to add another absolute: change. I think of the flux my parents lived through. My father, who died last year at the age of 93, had spanned most of a century in which change was intense. When he was born, cars and planes were still largely figments of the imagination. When he died, the computer revolution was old hat to most of us.

In some ways, my life has seen less dramatic outward change. I've always known a world of automobiles, planes and the comforts of modern technology. I've not been geographically dislocated nor suffered many major circumstantial traumas. But, like many other women of my generation, I've experienced multiple transitions, many closely linked to my concept of self-identity.

I started adult life expecting to be a stay-at-home wife and mother. As I remember it, one of my main motivations seems to have been finding a suitable mate with whom I could live out this scenario. At age 22, I thought I saw fairly clearly the road that lay ahead. But that road has taken many curves and detours I did not expect. And in some ways I hardly recognize that young girl so naively entering marriage, expecting to find all her fulfillment there (and I know my husband is sometimes also amazed, although he has graciously adapted).

The most significant vocational transition I've experienced has been the change from being an at-home mother to being a working academic. This shift has coincided with the transition from early adulthood to mid-life. Accompanying these changes have come many perceptual transitions. Although I find my vocation as an English instructor rewarding, I still greatly value home and family. But the tensions between these two worlds and the demands each brings have frequently been disturbing. Along the way have come inner paradigm shifts that have created disturbing dislocations and invoked many questions. At times during the last years I've found myself struggling with depression, a response, I think, in part at least, to my sense of shifting identity. While outer transitions (such as life-stage changes) are more obvious, inner transitions can be more subtle and disorienting.

How did I get to my present concept of self, with the interests and motivations that now make me tick? How did I change over time to value things now (such as opera and old hymns and intellectual discourse) that really did not

"turn me on" at age 20? Why did my theological views about gender and power shift so drastically over the last years? When did I start the process of changing from my younger more naive self to my sometimes world-weary but also (I hope) wiser self?

In the last decades social scientists have spent considerable time and energy interrogating the concept of self-identity. What happens to the self as circumstances and contexts change? Is there an essential self that emerges at birth and stays constant throughout life, regardless of circumstances? Or is our sense of self socially constructed, shifting as circumstances and contexts vary, so that the self I experienced at age 22 is no longer the "me" I experience now?

Personal experience leads me to embrace neither extreme, but rather to view personal identity as related to a thread of self-continuity, a core of constancy, in the midst of shifting, more superficial concepts of self-identity. While circumstances and responses may change drastically, deep within, at least for the spiritual person, a core of self remains, a "me" graced by God, remaining constant despite multiple inner changes.

However one views self, change is often frightening and intimidating for those who value continuity and consistency. To find oneself suddenly thrust into different ways of doing things, different ways of seeing reality, different circumstantial pressures, is not easy.

At one stage in my journey, an acquaintance shared with me a conceptual framework that helped me understand my struggles with change. She

suggested that a successful transition involves three stages: orientation, disorientation and reorientation. We move from the known (our current way of conceptualizing reality) to disorientation (the disruption of our secure comfortable ways of being and doing). We may long for our past orientation, but unless we go through a process of deconstructing our old perceptions, we have no room for new ways of conceptualizing reality. Disorientation, then, as uncomfortable as it may be, is an essential part of processing change. Without it a new perceptual paradigm is not possible. Gradually, reorientation becomes orientation, and before we know it, life's journey takes us once more through the process of change.

When did I start the process of changing from my younger more naive self to my sometimes world-weary but also wiser self?

Continued on page 21 ►

The Young Women of Yarrow

by Leonard Neufeldt

for Lora and Carol

In church young women
kept their sleeves down and mouths shut
and smiled if older women bulking the entrance
with simple hats and pins and uncut hair
nodded and let them by to be ushered
early to their seats in the front, on the left side -
except for Grandmother, women's usher,
who weeklong wore the cap
of midwife and nurse and Sundays
hats large as the Queen Mum's in the Vancouver Sun:
bosswoman. She waved bitter-smiling young women
to their place as though they had started into labor,
and the few who hurriedly found
their own seats far back she resealed
as though she was burying them.

Those women talked and picked faster
in the fields than young men, much faster
than the men who rechecked rows picked clean
by the women, blouses loosened
at the top and sleeves pushed up by mid-morning.
They carried their own berry-soaked flats
to the weighhouse, lifted them to the top
of the stack, waited for the flats to stop swaying
before returning to the row.
Some would grow strong like those who had left.
She put on a new dress to visit
the women in the field.

One day they would stop breaking their backs,
one day they would leave the starch out
of their father's collars, but not her husband's shirts,
not her daughters. Her granddaughters were strong;
they wheedled her daughters,
choosing hymns for their own weddings,
and they would find their own seats
on the right side with their children.
Some of the granddaughters climbed with their men
for almost a day to the top of Mount Cheam
to see the Pacific
separate itself left and right,
slowly, from the slate-green sky
a hundred miles away.



.....
Leonard Neufeldt grew up in Yarrow, BC. He teaches at Purdue University in Indiana. His books of poetry include A Way of Walking, Raspberrying and Yarrow.

Reprinted by permission of the author, from Raspberrying, Black Moss Press, 1991.

One Who Survived

As told to Helen Rose Pauls

My white silk sleeve brushes the gold rimmed edge of the china tea service – “Old Country Rose,” bought and paid for with raspberry money.

The white and red dinner plates lean solidly against the dark mahogany buffet. The cabbage roses seem to leap out at me, so like the red ones on our estate in Russia so long ago..., yes, red like blood.

Father was the choir master. How he adored my sister Tina, who could play the wonderful hand-carved oak piano and perform for guests in her silk dress: white and virginal like the long white flower tassels on the acacia trees lining the village street...pure white and unspotted.

How I felt loved as he helped me up beside him on the high seat of the wagon and we toured our estate, supervising the labour of the farm workers and servants. “Anna,” he would caution, “look at your heart first, not at your face. God looks at the heart.” I took pride in his agricultural talent: the rotation of the crops, the pure-bred cattle, the drooping orchards planted with seedlings from distant nurseries. I should have been born an eldest son, sitting at his right hand as we planned and carried out the farm operations.

We managed to survive the first frontal assault of the Russian Revolution: the constant requisitioning of soldiers, the White and Red armies, the night terrors of the bandits who raped, pillaged and killed with abandon. We survived the ensuing famine, the decimating typhus epidemic, the restructuring under Lenin's five year plan. But, we did not survive Stalin. Overnight, prosperous farm families from the Mennonite villages were rudely uprooted and loaded onto trains going in one direction only: north to Siberia.

Tina was the first to die of overwork, cold and starvation. She was a soft girl, a pianist. Felling trees and lopping off branches was impossible on so little food. I begged father for permission to leave our forest prison for I believed that none of us would survive the slave labour camp. He helped me memorize the addresses of relatives in the Urals, and I prepared for escape. I would be alone, riding the couplings of boxcars with strangers.

We walked out into the night, bright with stars. Like the Old Testament fathers, my father gave me his blessing. His body was shaking with loud and terrible sobs, and his tears flowed to the ground like water from a pitcher. I had never seen him weep before. Later, I heard he died shortly after. My mother and my two little brothers perished as well. Only two sisters would survive and eventually come to Canada.



Predictably, I was caught and thrown into prison with cut-throats and criminals. We were all weak from hunger. I lived in constant fear. Surely a God who rewarded the good and punished the bad had been forever stilled and rendered powerless by the destructive forces loose in the country. The stones could have cried out and the mountains covered me. I could pray no longer.

One night my name was called. I was free to leave. Since I was a wealthy landowner's daughter, I was denied a passport. But without one I could be arrested and returned to jail at any moment. Starving and cold, I lay down in the snow and wrestled with God. My parents had been good people. They had shared with the poor. My father had been a conscientious Christian. Our home had been a peaceful one. Where was God now?

My body shook and retched. I had not eaten for days. All was hopeless. I would die alone here, far from loved ones. God didn't care. I tried to pray one last time, bargaining with God. If he would give me one more chance to live,

I would be generous at every opportunity.

Then I saw an ethereal light. A voice seemed to call to me, “You are my child. Get up.” I walked until I saw a house that somehow exuded safety. I knocked and was warmly received. A soft bed. Clean sheets. Warm broth. I slept as if dead. These kind people booked my passage to my home town and saw me safely onto the train, caring for me as if I were their daughter.

Eventually, with the help of my future husband,

*Starving and cold, I lay
down in the snow and
wrestled with God.*

whom I had met in better times, I was able to get a pass and did not have to live in the shadows any longer. We married, had two children and acquired a small home. As soon as we heard that the German army was retreating during the Second World War, we got train passage to Germany. Anything to be away from Communism.

Mennonite Central Committee eventually helped us get in touch with relatives in Canada who sponsored us as refugees. What a wonderful country we entered! For the first time since the Revolution, honest work meant honest gain. We picked hops, living in hopyard shacks in Chilliwack until we could afford a patch of earth.

Then I sifted the rich river bottom loam between my fingers and thanked God for a new start. I cried tears of gratitude and kissed the earth. We planted trees and made a huge garden. How we ate potatoes! We planned, worked and sacrificed to build a house, a barn, acquire cows and chickens. God blessed us with two more children, and we prayed to live long enough to see them reach adulthood.

The raspberries gave us our renewal. I pruned the raspberry plants in the spring until the blood from the prickles ran down my shirt sleeves. I tied the vines to the wires, thinned the shoots, hoed the weeds and, together with my children, picked the berries, rain or shine, while my husband worked long hours at the local sawmill. Later, when we increased the acreage, I supervised the pickers and the older children while my little sons played and slept between raspberry rows.

We built a lovely house with hardwood floors and velvet drapes, not opulent like what had been left behind, but comfortable. We also built a house for my friend who came to this country as a widow with young children. I had promised to be generous.

My husband died at 86, and now I am left behind. When my daughter takes me shopping to Safeway, I still marvel at the rows of rich fruit, the abundance of food and my ability to buy as much as I want. After shopping, we return to my retirement house close to the church for coffee and *Zwiebach* with rich, red raspberry jam. Putting an apron over my silk blouse, I prepare the snack, using my white and red rose dishes. I thank God for my life, for my children, for this wonderful country, for safety, and for having more than enough. My questions about the past I must quell for now. I can only give thanks.

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Helen Rose Pauls is a school teacher, farm partner, speaker, homemaker and MCC BC board member. The storyteller wishes to remain anonymous.

Maria of Monjou, 1 5 5 2

by Barbara Nickel

I feel their rope around her naked thighs,
the mud slick on the bank. She won't forsake
that water down her neck, the blessing – *Baptized*
in Christ – as clerics fix a weighing rock.
I see her pressed under the river's braiding
currents, the shawls of leech and silt across
her back. A perch nibbles pieces. Shale blades
and shells erode the knots. By spring she's loose
in the sandy lobes of shallows where foxes come
to drink, nudge up small bones that run with seeds
of willow downstream and snag on rapids foaming
at the river's throat. Here all converges, seethes.
Close to the falls I feel a seam of mist
breathe down my arms to find my beating wrists.

.....
*Barbara Nickel recently moved from Vancouver to Newfoundland. Her first book of poetry, *The Gladys Elegies*, won the 1998 Pat Lowther Memorial Prize. She has also written *The Secret Wish of Nannerl Mozart* (reviewed in this issue).*

*Reprinted by permission of author from *The Gladys Elegies*, Coteau Books, 1997.*

LETTERS

I so much enjoyed reading the "Tending the Earth" issue (Summer 1998). It is very beautiful and touching. My mother was a gardener extraordinaire, which several of my daughters have also inherited. You do an excellent job, and I congratulate you and want to encourage you to continue your service of love for us women.

*Katherine Jantz
Winnipeg*

.....
Sophia welcomes your comments and suggestions. Please write or e-mail us at the address on page 2.

A Letter to My Granddaughter

by ADJ

MY DEAR KAITLYN,

It was so nice to hear from you on Mother's Day. For me it has always been a "sweet and sour" day. As I get older, I realize more and more how my experience of being a motherless daughter has affected my life. I know you are now probably expecting my story, but today I want to tell you about your great grandmother, our "special *Oma*."

Her story begins, of course, in Russia. Four-year-old Helena lived happily in a rural Mennonite village with her parents, three sisters and a new baby brother. Their little house on her grandparents' yard was too small, so one day soon her papa was going to build them a bigger one. Her paralysed grandmother needed constant care. It was often Helena, a beautiful little girl with long shiny black hair and sparkling dark brown eyes, who sat with her, serving as a fetch and carry.

One day her father sat her down on his knee and gave her the news that forever changed her life. The family was moving to the city where he had a new job, but Helena was to stay with *Oma* who needed her. She cried bitterly the day the family packed the wagon and drove away.

What she thought would be days turned into years. Her mother sent her cards from time to time, but the family faded from her mind until she had trouble remembering what her mama looked like. She forgot what it was like to play with other children. There was only fetch and carry and her bedridden grandmother.

Then one day came news that her parents were coming for a visit. There was such excitement preparing and such disappointment when they arrived. Mama was a stranger. When Helena called her *Tante*, her mother cried. Her siblings were much bigger now, and she didn't know the new baby. Soon the visit was over. And every day the doorway to Helena's heart narrowed a little more.

The years went by. Eventually Mama and Papa moved back to the little house. Since there were now seven children there was no room for Helena. When the new house was built they would find room for her.

But plans changed. Mama died and Helena lost forever any opportunity to bond with her mother. Papa soon married again, and his new wife had a daughter Helena's age. Somehow room was found in the little house for her and a new baby brother. Helena, however, continued to

live with and care for her *Oma*.

Tragedy struck again. This time her father died, and suddenly they were all orphans. The Mennonite social services distributed the children among the various families of the village. So Helena never did live with her sisters and brothers in a family setting, losing the opportunity to form close ties with them.

Suddenly life changed with lightening speed. Her *Oma* died, her *Opa* remarried, and the new grandmother did not want Helena around, so she was sent to live with an uncle who already had a large family. By now she was thirteen, and she began to carry a major part of the workload. The political climate in Russia was incredibly uncertain. Just getting enough for everyone to eat became a daily problem. Helena was always at the end of the food line. She thought often about her siblings. When she met them in the village she saw that life was hard for them too. Sometimes she felt as though God had forgotten all about them.

When Helena was eighteen, she was granted a golden opportunity. The love of her life, already in Canada, sent for her. Her *Opa* graciously gathered her siblings together the morning of her departure and together they had a tearful farewell. Helena believed that she would never see them again.

Life in the new country was exciting and wonderful but not without problems. For the first time she lived in a larger family setting with her new husband, his parents, siblings and some other relatives. Working together on the farm was difficult, but Helena, always private and resourceful, soon created her own family context. Each child was wanted, loved and nourished. Children were a gift of God and ten were not too many. Even the last one, a special needs baby, was greeted with enthusiasm and loved even more because of her needs.

Daily life became all-consuming. Her husband was often ill, but the farm work somehow always got done and the children were all cared for. Yet somewhere, in the depths of her heart, a heart that she thought was locked up safe and sound, were faint stirrings of grief and loss. She thought often about her siblings in Russia but seldom heard from them. Their letters were vague, giving little information about their condition. Eventually she lost touch with all but three.

Her children grew up, got good jobs and established families of their own. They experienced their own mixture

*When Helena called her
Tante, her mother cried.*



of joys and sorrows. She buried her husband and two grandsons. The day she placed her special needs child in a care home was one of unbearable pain. How could she abandon her needy child to an institution? Although her children and their spouses showered her with love and devotion, an unexplained sadness appeared more and more.

Finally, when she was over eighty, Helena heard from her brother, then living in Germany. Panic set in when she realized he was coming for a visit. She didn't know this stranger! Her children were excited at the opportunity to learn more about their mother's family because she had told them so little about her childhood. When he arrived she found it hard to open herself emotionally to this kind and loving man. His visit was a time of emotional confusion that almost overwhelmed her.

Excited by the visit, her four younger daughters decided to take her to Germany to visit two of her sisters. She reluctantly agreed to go, all the while becoming more and more confused. Memories that she felt were best buried kept reappearing. Her life in Canada had been so different from that of her sisters. How could they possibly understand that her life had also often been unbearable? Having lived alone now for more than twenty years, she

found the thought of continually being with strangers frightening. Her individually wonderful and loving daughters became a noisy, unmanageable handful when together. How was she going to cope?

Before she had time to process what was happening, they were on the plane to Germany. Emotions ran high. Her four daughters could hardly contain their excitement, giggling like children going on a trip together. Helena watched them in amazement. Where did all this togetherness come from? This was a part of family life she had never experienced.

I would have liked to see the reunion between "our special Oma" and her sisters. They had not seen each other for over seventy years! Helena was overwhelmed by the love they showered upon her. She, always so private and reserved, was suddenly experiencing an unknown closeness. Her sisters, with their open teasing, laughter and joy, were not too different from her daughters. They were overjoyed at being united at last with their sister – something they had never dreamed of. Helena wondered why she felt so much more like an observer than a participant.

Suddenly Helena experienced a moment of intense clarity, realizing she had been robbed of her childhood and abandoned by her parents. This is what had been her lifetime grief. She felt intense anger. Now, when she was too old to make changes, she was expected to be joyful at the uniting of a family with whom she had never been able to bond.

When I spent some time with your "special Oma" yesterday we talked briefly about her sisters. She becomes quite agitated when they are mentioned. As I left, she said to me, "I never learned how to live in a family." I understand these distressing feelings. In her lifetime, this pain will never go away.

And so, my dear Kaitlyn, I want you to know that I thank God every day for the wonderful parents you have. I know from experience that being a motherless daughter is difficult. It must be doubly tragic also to be abandoned.

Love,
Oma

.....
ADJ is a Sardis housewife who likes to tell stories about life in Russia to her grandchildren so they know where they came from and where they are going. Photos show Helena at the time of her separation from her family and at age ninety.

A Refugee's Experience: An Interview with Martha Perello

by Lois Klassen

Martha Perello came to Vancouver in November 1989 from the city of San Pedro Sula, Honduras, with her husband, Felix, and eldest son Alessandro. They arrived with only a few suitcases, limited savings and a list of Vancouver gospel chapels provided by their Honduran pastor. Political instability, economic problems, poverty and crime prompted their departure from Honduras. As we talk in a Vancouver restaurant, Martha's lunch cools on her plate as she searches for the correct English words to communicate the desperation in her homeland.

In spite of the deteriorating Honduran social fabric, the decision to leave was difficult. "We prayed about it for a long time, and our families prayed too," she says. Their decision was made more difficult by the full lives they would have to leave behind. Martha had made many friends at university and had a career as a junior architect. Felix, her husband of two years, had a secure job as superintendent in a clothing factory and a large close-knit family.

Family, more than career or friends, has been the most significant loss. She reminisces, "Every Sunday we knew Felix's family would be getting together after church and we felt very lonely imagining them meeting without us."

Ironically, it was family that prompted their move in the first place. "If we were selfish and thinking only of ourselves we would have stayed in Honduras," she explains, "because it's hard to come to a new country. When you leave your country you lose your identity – you are just a number. We did it for our children. We wanted a better life for them."

Martha had a friend living in Vancouver who helped them find housing on arrival. Felix began telephoning their list of local churches. When a fellow immigrant, a Fijian, answered one of his calls, he felt he had found a welcoming place. While attending Cascades Gospel Chapel, they met a Spanish speaking older couple – former missionaries to Peru – who "adopted" Felix and Martha, eventually becoming surrogate grandparents to their children.

Employment was more difficult to find. Felix was without work for nearly a year. During this time Martha gave birth to Gabriel, their second son. She recalls begging God to provide their basic needs – especially a job for her husband – and feeling powerless to alter their circumstances. "I trusted that God would help us, but I wanted to do something on my own

to make our circumstances better, and I couldn't do anything," she recalls. Filled with worry, she had difficulty eating and sleeping. As the emotional strain grew she began to question the wisdom of her decisions. Should she have married Felix? Should they have come to Canada?

Martha has trouble articulating the emotional turmoil she endured during that first year. She attributes some of it to the heightened emotions of pregnancy and her worry about her mother's and brother's physical safety in rural Honduras.

She smiles wryly, explaining the reality of life at that time. "I don't know if you know this, but Latino men are not raised to help in the home." Accustomed to having a career and financial independence, she found herself trapped in a strange country with two small children and a disheartened husband who sat in front of the TV month after month, unable to find even menial work.

They lived on their savings and prayed. Martha recalls her inability to understand why God did not answer her prayers – she was not asking for luxuries but the necessities of daily life. She also recalls anger toward her husband: surely he could find work if he would only try a little harder. Yet she also realised he had little hope of success because of the

language barrier and his lack of references. She lost her financial independence; with little money and no job in sight, her husband took over all the household finances. She remembers wishing for a picture to hang on the wall or for a plant to soften the bleakness of their existence.

After the birth of Gabriel, they moved from a two- to a one-bedroom apartment in an effort to economize. Meanwhile, they waited in uncertainty for their refugee claim to be processed. After eight months they were granted refugee status and were then eligible for social assistance. Soon after this Felix found part-time janitorial work. A significant improvement came with their move into a nearby MCC social housing complex – Charleswood Court. Apartments there are arranged around a landscaped courtyard with space for children's play and informal visiting with neighbours. Not only was this a better environment for their children, but their rent was now indexed to their income.

Eventually Felix found full-time employment with MCC Social Housing, as the manager of Charleswood housing complex. In spite of all her prayers, Martha remembers her

"If we were selfish and thinking only of ourselves we would have stayed in Honduras."



reaction when he was invited to apply. "Be realistic," she told him, "You're not Mennonite – you are not even Canadian. They are not going to hire you!" Architect Sig Toews, Social Housing Board Chair, interviewed Felix. Martha credits her architectural background with breaking the ice and providing a topic of conversation. Not only did Felix get the job but a lasting friendship developed.

Since then, Martha has completed three semesters of English language studies; she and Felix have sponsored her mother and brother as immigrants to Canada and they have had a third son, Juan Jose. Recently Martha began working four days a week at a fast food restaurant to pay back a debt incurred by a trip back to Honduras. The hours allow her to be home most school nights to help her eldest son with his homework. She has plans to retrain as a medical lab assistant as soon as her youngest child is more independent. I asked why she had abandoned her architectural career. She explained that retraining would require long hours away from her family. Pursuing her own career goals at the expense of her young children is not something she is willing to do.

The needs of her family have dictated many of Martha's decisions.

She counts coming to Canada and sponsoring the immigration of her mother and brother as her greatest accomplishments. Yet these decisions have also complicated her life in perplexing ways. Martha sees herself as the mediator between the various family members and the pivot around which their daily life revolves. Holding up her index finger, she says, "This is me." Then, drawing circles in the air around it with her other hand, she adds, "These are my children, my husband, my younger brother and my mother. Sometimes it is too much."

She speaks of trying to find a balance between her needs and theirs – of the difficulty of being a sister to her much younger brother when she often feels more like a mother figure; of being the "woman of the house" but sharing the house with her mother; of helping her eldest son cope with school and caring for her two youngest children while maintaining a job.

"Do you have many friends here?" I ask her.

Laughing, she replies, "No, just a few close ones. My mother who has only been here three years has more friends than I do."

Despite the difficult challenges, Martha believes that coming to Canada was the right decision. This was tragically confirmed in 1992 when Felix's 38-year-old brother, the father of four young children, was killed by a bullet intended for someone else. Martha believes that God opened the way for them to come to Canada. Like many women, she daily experiences many conflicting demands on her time. Her faith in God provides her with hope even as she strives to order her often chaotic life and to plan for the future.

To Everything There is a Season ...

By Hilda Born

Scripture gives us many examples of difficult transitions. Our biblical mother Eve's eviction from her luxury home in Eden was definitely traumatic. And her path was marked with further family tragedy. We also read about Job's many sorrows. Hopefully our transitions aren't as traumatic. However, in difficult times our equanimity is challenged.

Useful advice comes in Ecclesiastes 7:10, which states: "Do not say, 'Why were the old days better than these?' For it is not wise to ask such questions." (NIV) Ecclesiastes also tells us that to everything there is a season. The wise understand that life unfolds in stages. To help us make good use of each season of life, Ecclesiastes urges us to enjoy prosperity while we have it and not to fight the challenges God gives us.

As women who put much energy into maintaining a stable home, it is hard for us to be uprooted. However, turning back and clinging to the past with longing and regret can be deadly. Excessive mulling over failures and losses blurs our view of the present and prevents us from seeing the opportunities that change often brings.

Hilda Born is a published author and a member of Central Heights MB church, Abbotsford, BC. She recently graduated from the Open Learning University.



A Career Change

by Dorothy Martens

I hate change ... except when I can engineer it myself. I heard someone say recently that change means loss, loss means pain, and we don't like pain, so we don't change. Change often brings pain, uncertainty, fear and diminished confidence. But it is also exhilarating, confidence-building, and faith-enhancing. Often during change I feel like an indecisive trapeze artist, trying to judge the safest time to let go of one swing and grab another.

This was my experience as I considered making a career change. I had twenty years of nursing experience, fifteen of those as a public health nurse. I had advanced as far as I could and really didn't want to start over at the bottom of the heap. Yet I still had twenty more years before retirement.

Did I want to spend them in the same secure well-paid job? Or should I take a chance and grab hold of something new? Should I move from being an expert in my field to becoming a student in an unfamiliar area?

Along with these questions came fears. I was afraid of failure, of having to come home in disgrace. I lacked confidence in my own intelligence. I had a dream, but I could not see it as coming from God. Finally I asked myself, "Can I live with myself if I allow fear of failure to make up my mind for me?" I realized I needed to take up the challenge and trust that God would go before me.

At that time I could not talk about God calling me to be a pastor. What was happening to me was too intangible. I talked rather in terms of a dream. But I could not even see the dream as a God-given one. It was a dream for someone else. Only over time could I begin to say that the dream was for me.

Others began to encourage me to make a career change. My friend Karen asked me about my five-year plan and then kept reminding me of all the things I needed to do. One of my fellow ushers at church sat me down and told me that ushering was not where my abilities and skills should be used. My brothers and sisters spoke words of encouragement to me. I think they saw my calling before I did.

After my decision to attend seminary, I asked God

for three things: support from my family, health and strength for the journey and success with the task. I sold my car, condominium, furniture – everything but my clothes, books and dishes. Then I moved to Fresno!

Now, seven years later, I am amazed at what God has given me: not only affirmation from my family, but support and encouragement from a host of people (professors, friends, etc.), good health, a master's degree, a new church family, and a job I had only dreamed of.

However, these did not come easily. Included in the process were difficult changes, loss and pain. I went from giving advice as an expert in Public Health Nursing to sitting with parents who had lost a son, unable to give them any answers. I moved from job security to not knowing what would happen in the next year. My former job had been goal-oriented; now I seemed to be continually struggling with process. I had been guaranteed a secure retirement. Now I sometimes think I will need to work forever. I had a wonderful home with carefully chosen co-ordinated furnishings; now my home is furnished in eclectic early university style!

I was diagnosed with Lupus twenty-one years ago. Even though

I am now healthier than I have been in years, I still struggle with times of depression and pain. My close relationship with God is my strength but is sometimes also fragile.

I should be feeling unnerved, but in fact, most of the time I have never been happier! Experiencing both external and internal changes, I have learned to trust God for many things that I had earlier felt quite able to provide for myself. I have been strengthened by the journey and encouraged by being able to do things I never imagined myself capable of doing. Weekly, I am challenged to do the task God has laid before me, to translate his love and holiness into people's everyday, ordinary lives.

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Dorothy Martens is a pastor at Sardis Community Church and a marriage and family therapist. She has a wry sense of humour and enjoys reading, needlework and cooking.



At that time I could not talk about God calling me to be a pastor. What was happening to me was too intangible.

Toddling Away At the Speed of Light

by Roxanne Willems Snopek

A cardboard box sits in the corner of the bedroom shared by my two youngest daughters. It holds the remains of a bulk-size package of toddler diapers, purchased about a year ago. At 3, my youngest hasn't needed diapers except at night for quite some time. So why is the box still there?

It's more than inertia, although I am at best an adequate housekeeper. It's not that my daughter is attached to it. On the contrary, she protests bitterly that a diaper "looks silly" under her pyjamas, but since she recalls the feel of cold, damp sheets in the middle of the night, she gives in gracefully. There was a time, before she was born, that I packed away all the baby things, shoved them onto shelves and temporarily forgot them. It was easy then - I knew I'd be using them again. But now - once these diapers are gone, they will probably be gone for good. The baby things will be put away permanently and a chapter in my life will close.

It has been a decade now since I became pregnant with my first child, a cosmic right-hook if ever there was one. Parenthood was a foreign language. It was for other people, stable, prepared, *older* people. Not twenty-five-year-olds who still weren't sure what they wanted to be when they grew up.

But I rallied. More than rallied. I embraced motherhood, not just as a life stage or even as a career, but as a calling. I would answer this calling with the righteous fervour it demanded. Look at me ... I am carrying *life* itself. What mattered postponed ambition or a deferred career? I would be raising the next generation as it had never been done before. Purpose and enlightenment would keep me from the mistakes made by ordinary parents.

My children would be healthy, smart and strong. Our home would be a peaceful, welcoming haven where voices were never raised in anger, and where affection would overflow. Oh, and it would be neat and tidy too.

I was naive and arrogant, but I meant well and tried hard. Still, my babies cried inconsolably, my toddlers threw tantrums in supermarkets, and I screamed when I meant to be empathetic. I steadfastly nursed my babies (they threw up), slept with them (they fell out of bed), and offered fresh fruit instead of sweets (ironically, I may own Kraft Dinner shares). I read countless parenting books, was inspired by lectures, but still can't remember a thing when my three-year-old digs in her heels. I listen to feelings, take temperatures when my children are sick, but have ignored a broken arm. But a decade after the arrival of my first baby, I have my children and they are healthy, smart and strong. Our



home, while not neat and tidy, is noisier with laughter than it is with tears, and my husband and I love each other.

I know my life will move in other directions as they grow up, but I will miss the chaos of small children. My oldest shares my love of late-night mystery novels, my middle one never lets me out of the house without a kiss, and my youngest wants to marry me. They are the shining stars of my life, in spite of my fumbling. For better or worse, I've poured so much into these little people and have gotten so much more in return that my heart quails at moving on.

The wild-eyed evangelist is gone now. In her place is a grown-up woman whose arms have grown strong from the heft of small, sleepy bodies. A woman who kicks and squeals against what's good for her as vehemently as any toddler. A woman who will cry one day as she carries an old cardboard box out to the curb for recycling.

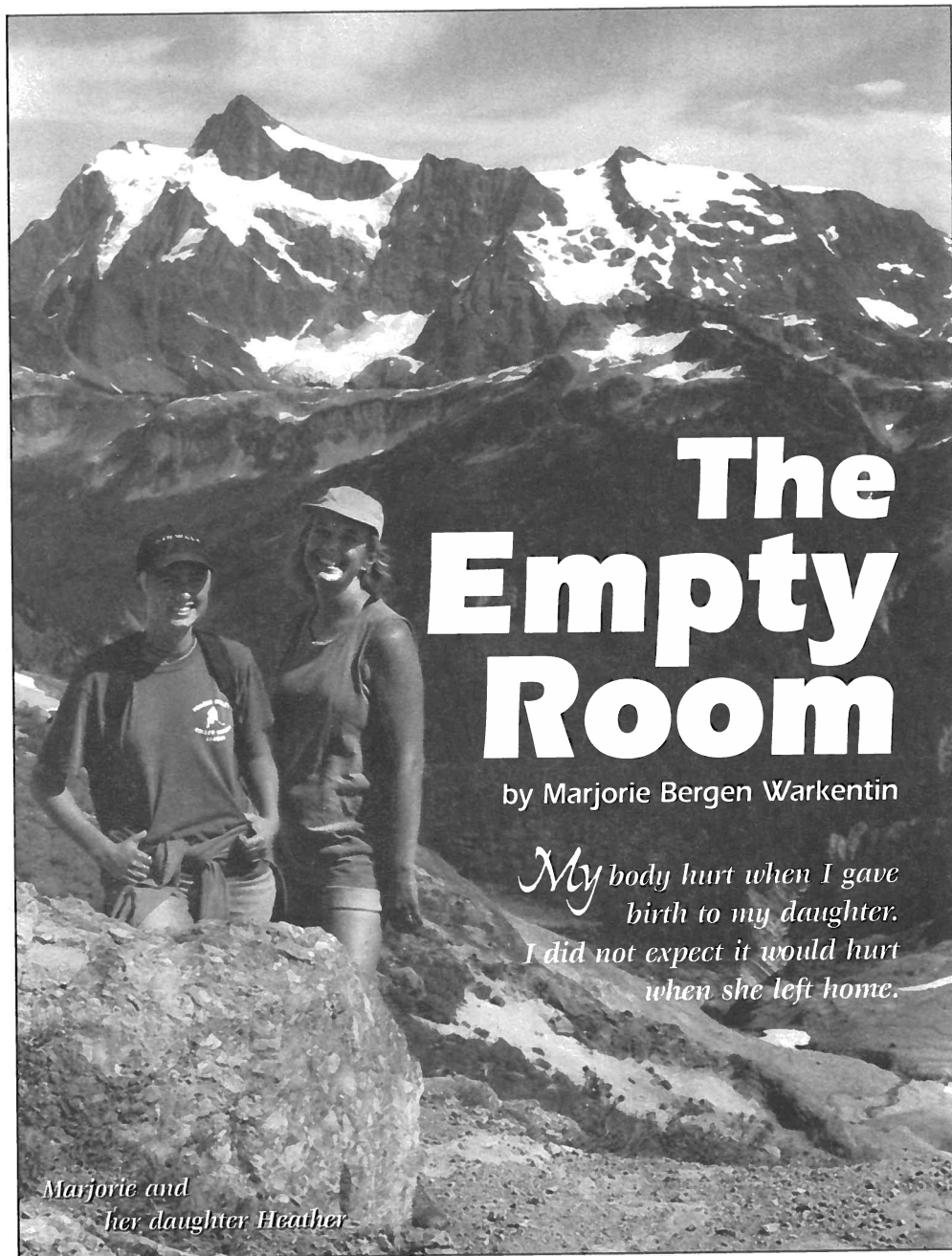
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Roxanne Willems Snopek lives in Abbotsford, BC, with her husband, Ray, home-schooled daughters Stephanie, Andrea and Megan, and various pets. Along with her main job of mothering, she also teaches veterinary assistants, helps manage the couple's animal hospital, and writes whenever she can. When the next maternal urge hits, she plans to get a puppy. Email her at Salive@bc.sympatico.ca

Today I walk past the open door of my daughter's room. Not liking what I see, I quickly close the door. No, it's not that the bed is unmade, that books, clothes and clutter fill every inch of floor space. Those are the reasons I used to close her bedroom door. What I see today is much more difficult to forget. Bare walls. No candle wax dripping onto the windowsill. No guitar leaning against the bed. In fact, today I can see the bed – smooth, tidy, not slept in. My daughter has left home, leaving behind more than an empty room. She has left behind a mother filled with sadness and loneliness.

The physical sensations surprise me. Is this how a broken heart feels? My chest feels heavy. I do not want to eat. I am tired, physically drained. I want to be alone and have no interest in the fortieth birthday party to which we are invited. If only I could cry. My neck and shoulder muscles ache. My body hurt when I gave birth to my daughter. I did not expect it would hurt when she left home.

Loneliness is a private journey. My husband expresses his sorrow more immediately and concretely. I do not have the energy to comfort him and am jealous of his ability to show his emotions so readily. I am not yet ready to talk about my loss.

Other emotions crowd into my consciousness. I feel disoriented. Who am I? When my daughter, my first child, was born I wondered, "Am I really a mother? Can I do this job? Will she like me?" Again, questions confront me. "What kind of mother can I be now? What if my child does not need me anymore? What if we drift apart emotionally? Will I become irrelevant or peripheral to her life? Will we remain geographically distant? How will I get to know the woman she is becoming?"



The Empty Room

by Marjorie Bergen Warkentin

My body hurt when I gave birth to my daughter. I did not expect it would hurt when she left home.

Marjorie and her daughter Heather

We are good friends, my daughter and I. She gives marvellous massages and is a sensitive, reflective listener. Like me, she loves to drink coffee and talk. She has an artistic eye for just the right outfit or accessory. Because of her encouragement and advice I have bought clothes that I never thought would be "me." Many of them have become my favourites!

Another emotion intrudes my loneliness. I find myself envying my daughter her youth, her beauty, her future. Even the uncertainty she faces has appeal. Her life is not predictable and boring the way mine sometimes seems to be. Will anyone understand these feelings? Or will they think I am a selfish, immature woman who is afraid to grow up?

Why am I so sad? This occasion of my daughter

Returning Home

by Anna Klassen

leaving home was not an unplanned departure. We have parted on good terms and plan to keep in touch. But my mourning is reminding me of other hurts and losses. Decisions made, disappointments experienced, things I could have done differently.

These I cannot undo. And so I acknowledge the intensity of my sorrow, recognizing that mid-life is a time of reflection, a time to mourn the loss of my youth. Right now I don't feel ready for this new stage of my life.

Nonetheless, this is my new reality. I spend hours writing in my journal. I reach out to my women friends. I begin to talk with my husband about our daughter's home-leaving. Slowly, new ways of viewing this experience begin to take shape. It is a relief to realize I can be honest about how I feel. Acknowledged feelings are easier to live with than those I deny. When I risk sharing my thoughts and feelings, I am comforted by my friends' responses.

During this time of transition I am learning that there are many ways of expressing grief. Respecting my husband's way allows me to receive his comfort. He reminds me that our daughter's leaving is not only about loss. For example, I now have more time to be alone, to reflect on my life. What gives me joy? Am I caring for myself? I still have a future. How might it unfold for me? My husband and I begin to talk about redefining our relationship. There is a certain freedom in having only two children at home. We anticipate a vacation for "just the two of us."

I remind myself that my goals as a mother have been to equip my daughter to become a strong, independent, adventuresome woman. In this I have been successful.

Going back to my daughter's room I open the door. The room is still empty and my loneliness lingers. But I also experience a stirring of hope. In addition to the wonderful memories of our times together, I am beginning to have a new vision of the mother I am becoming. And I am starting to form a new picture of my far-away daughter who will continue to be my friend. I turn away, leaving the door open. In my mind I see the room with its glorious clutter, as it will be again when she comes to visit.

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Marjorie Bergen Warkentin lives in Abbotsford, BC, with her husband, two sons and two cats. She is a public health nurse who enjoys supporting new mothers in their life transitions. She enjoys walking, hiking, reading, tennis, and coffee with her women friends. Her daughter, Heather, who recently left home for the second time, is attending university in Winnipeg.

Last spring, just before returning home from Winnipeg, I was leafing through my scrapbook and found a piece of paper entitled "losses." It was followed by a list of things I had missed about living in British Columbia: family, friends, mountains, visits with *Oma*, my bike. I wrote this list during one of my first chapels at Concord College as we were encouraged to reflect on the losses resulting from significant changes in our lives. I had just moved 1500 miles to attend school in a new province with complete strangers as classmates and roommates. This exercise reminded me of what I had left behind when I moved to Manitoba and why I valued those things.

As I prepared to leave Winnipeg, I felt very reluctant to leave this place about which I had known nothing eight months earlier. Struggling with this while packing and saying goodbye to my new friends, I realized my reluctance stemmed from my fear of returning to something familiar, like my hometown, as a changed person. Leaving something familiar is often easier than returning to it again.

Back in BC, I found myself sitting in my bedroom again reflecting on this list, realizing how much my life had changed over the past year. As I weighed the pros and cons of returning home, I realized that even though I would have a fresh list of losses, I was gaining back many of those on my original list. A good friend reminded me in a letter that summer would be a time of huge changes for me, even if they seemed "of a subtler type than the ones that happen while sitting at the feet of our 'guru' professors in college."

This fall I will attend college in Lithuania. I am looking forward to this experience, but at the same time I am apprehensive. However, I am thankful for these changes in my life. As I learned in my feminist theology course, I must not fear change (either dramatic or subtle), but embrace it if it promises to bring forth new life.

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Anna Klassen is a Concord College student now studying at Lithuania Christian College in Klaipeda, Lithuania.



Reflections on the Women Doing Theology Conference

June 25-27, 1998



Katharina Rempel

Attending the fourth *Women Doing Theology* conference sponsored by the MCC Women's Concerns Office and Kansas Mennonite Women in Ministry was a wonderful experience for me. It was a time to learn and to play, away from the daily demands and stresses of life.

In Kansas we were greeted by a heat wave. I enjoyed the warm sunshine and the wind, in contrast to the cool dark weather I had left behind in Abbotsford. One of the first things I noticed was the amazing hospitality of the people I met in Newton. They gladly helped to iron out unforeseen difficulties and accommodate unexpected needs. Their generosity with time, transportation and hospitality made me feel very welcome.

The conference theme, "Journey Toward Healing," gave focus to the presentations and the wide variety of workshops. I found the presentations stimulating and appreciated their fresh perspectives on familiar stories of biblical women. I enjoyed Wilma Bailey's thought-provoking paper on dignity and women in the Old Testament. I was glad to hear women being encouraged to "lift their heads" and to recognize the biblical trajectory of grace pointing us to the dignity of all persons, regardless of gender, race or status. From other presenters we heard of the need to heal the mind/body split for the health of the whole person. Hearing about God having compassion for humanity and mourning with those who suffer violence felt comforting. Some issues raised needed further discussion and were processed in small group discussions and related workshops.

The highlight of the conference for me was connecting with other women and sharing stories of "doing theology" in our own lives. The similar dynamics in our stories established bonds across ethnic, cultural and age boundaries. Differences in perspective and experience provided opportunities to reflect on diversity and became opportuni-

ties for learning. I felt the solidarity of many other women and drew strength from this. I left the conference feeling nurtured, affirmed and encouraged.

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Katharina Rempel lives in Abbotsford with her husband, Henry. She works as a counsellor in private practice and at Abbotsford Community Services. She enjoys outdoor recreation, reading and movies.

Maryann Tjart Jantzen

As I participated in the healing ritual on the last morning of the conference, I found myself thinking once more about the power of women worshipping together. The prayer and anointing with oil spoke of present healing. The lighting of individual candles re-membered women's lives, from the biblical women's lives narrated throughout the conference to the lives of those present, incorporating not only our individual faith stories but also those of our foremothers.

"This is the day of new beginnings," we sang. "Nothing can trouble, nothing can frighten." Together we formed a community of hope and remembrance.

My experience of the Kansas conference was very different from my experience of the other *Women Doing Theology* conferences I have attended. In 1992, at Waterloo, I was challenged and stretched, even intimidated as I encountered a plethora of perspectives, ranging from biblical feminism to radical feminist perspectives. In Winnipeg, in 1996, I participated as a respondent and felt secure in my own recently reworked perspectives on faith and gender. I enjoyed the diversity of viewpoints and was affirmed in my own faith story.

This conference didn't challenge me in the same ways. Less academic, it did not seem to overtly question conventional ways of doing theology, but focused more on the living out of faith in the midst of pain, on the possibility of healing in the midst of brokenness.

Throughout we were asked to identify with the lives of women – both scriptural (as narrated in the worship liturgies and Wilma Bailey's paper on dignity and women in the Old Testament) and contemporary, as we heard stories of pain and the need for healing (especially evident in the stories of the few Hispanic women present). I think this emphasis on embodied theology, lived out in the real lives of real women, was an important strength of the conference.

At the last plenary on Saturday morning, Elizabeth Soto challenged us to learn to live in Shalom, a wholeness that does not divide mind, body and spirit. She shared of her own experiences as a health care worker / wife / mother / theologian. She reminded me again of the need to refuse destructive dualism and of the need for theology to be embodied and concrete, not only conceptualized in the abstract. I also found myself reflecting on the areas in my life that need

healing – reminded that God can heal when all human effort fails.

My memories of the conference include the stifling 100 degree heat (I am so thankful for air conditioning!), the spacious Newton College campus, the vistas of endless sky and prairie, the Kansas hospitality and warmth, the many women who shared their stories, privately and publicly, the delightful poetry of Raylene Hinz Penner and Carla Toews, the carefully planned worship sessions, the many female pastors (I've never met so many in one place before!) and much more. As before, I've come away with renewed recognition of the "rightness" of women gathering together to "do theology."

Lori Matties

For the whole of the eighteen-hour drive from Winnipeg to Kansas and back again, five of us were certainly *women doing theology*. We are a group that meets once a month to discuss books, explore new thoughts and share our lives together. The conference was simply a wonderful excuse to do more. So we pampered ourselves with good food, hot tubs and lots of laughter. We discussed the state of women in the MB church, tried to discover why it is so hard to get women to serve on MB Conference boards. We wondered why "the women's issue" has taken a back seat for many of the women pastors we met at the conference. Between sessions we walked in the hot Kansas sun, reflecting on the state of our own "theology of women." We cruised the streets of Newton (and Hillsboro), read aloud from a book called *Wild, Succulent Woman*, shopped very little (!), sold a few *Sophia* magazines, made new – and renewed old – connections. We, all of us, are always women doing theology. A gathering such as the one in Kansas is a reason to celebrate with joy and humility our growing ability to share with one another the wisdom God has given us.

Reflections on Inner Change

Continued from page 8

These concepts help me to make sense of the transitions I find myself making. They also help me to conceptualize life as process, a journey through a changing landscape, rather than as a static state of being. Going on a physical journey introduces us to new geography, enlarging our sense of physical context. Likewise the journey of making transitions enlarges us by exposing us to new ways of being and doing. We are able to explore parts of ourselves we might never otherwise access. Thus the journey of change itself becomes a doorway to renewal and revitalization, as new discoveries are incorporated into the paradigms of the past.

I have certainly found this to be true. Although the many transitions I've experienced have been unsettling, they've also opened exciting new vistas. As I began my graduate English studies, many of my theological perspectives were challenged. I experienced considerable disorientation as I struggled to reconcile the two worlds I moved between: the secular university context and my faith community. In my church setting I would often feel silenced, afraid to articulate my inner struggles and questions for fear of being branded heretical. At the university I risked being labelled narrow-minded if I openly articulated my Christian perspectives.

For a time, the darkness of disorientation became a disturbing daily companion. However, gradually I have found new meaningful ways of conceptualizing my spiritual and intellectual journey. A book I found very helpful along the way was *Trackless Wastes: Stars to Steer By*, by Mennonite author Michael King. I found myself identifying with his experience of moving from a pre-critical orientation (in which faith was accepted naively and unthinkingly) through a

critical/skeptical period (in which religious beliefs were intellectually problematized) to a new post-critical orientation in which "we open ourselves to the possibility of a second naiveté, a second innocence" that appreciates and affirms pre-critical truths but "makes them relevant to the modern world." As I've moved through this transition, I've found my faith becoming intellectually meaningful as well as spiritually satisfying, although I still struggle with unanswered questions.

Throughout my transitions God has been present, constantly loving and accessible. Despite many struggles and questions, I have found myself on a satisfying journey of discovery. My younger self could not have comprehended herself as capable of teaching at a university; my older self is sometimes still amazed but also aware of how right it feels, thankful that I've been able to use the intellectual gifts God has given me.

In the process of my journeying, I find the metaphor of God as rock, as solidity in the face of flux, a useful one. I conceptualize Deity, however, not only as rock solid but also as a landmark always within sight of my wandering. The image of a life-giving rock in a weary place is a comfort as I travel through what sometimes seem to be desert places. Perhaps this is where the secure core of being, so necessary in the face of change, resides – in our inner connections with the divine as we live among the maelstrom of change that is our post-modern reality.

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Maryann Tjart Jantzen lives in Mission, BC with her husband and daughter. Along with teaching English at Trinity Western University in Langley, BC, she enjoys gardening, writing, walking and travelling. She is especially thankful for her women friends, who have been a wonderful support during significant times of transition.

A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows Through Loss

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by Gerald L. Sittser,
Zondervan, 1996, 181 pp.

Reviewed by Lois Klassen.

A Grace Disguised is a book about hope, grace and transformation of the soul in the face of staggering pain, setbacks and personal chaos. The author is uniquely qualified to write about grief and loss, having lost three generations of women – mother, wife and daughter – in one horrific accident.

Sittser attempts to comprehend “not what happens to us, but what happens in us.” He offers hope and comfort in the face of devastating loss and grief without attempting to offer a strategy for recovery or resorting to simplistic platitudes.

A sense of powerlessness brought on by terrible injustices or crushing disappointments may leave people feeling that they have no choices. Sittser suggests that, while we often cannot choose what happens to us, we can choose how we react to our circumstances and, therefore, how we continue to live with them. He develops his argument with an authentic voice – he is someone who knows, who has thought carefully about these issues (the book is based on his journals). He tells the truth bravely and articulately.

Sittser writes about integrating our inevitable sorrows into a healthy life. Situating suffering within the context of ordinary life, he dares to broach a topic that offers no easy answers and raises many difficult questions. What gives this book its depth and power (and its capacity to minister to a variety of people with disparate needs) is the author's choice

to focus on the universal experience of loss rather than solely on his own particular case. He uses his own experiences and the stories of others to illustrate how we can grow through suffering and how meaning can be gained in suffering, but this is not a biography or a memoir.

Effortless spiritual victories are conspicuously absent from this book. However, honest reflection and genuine joy, even in the midst of intense pain, pervade its pages. Highly recommended.

piecework: a women's peace theology

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Mennonite Central Committee
Canada, 1997.

Reviewed by Donna Stewart.

What would a peace theology developed by women look like? This question sparked a unique discussion among seven Mennonite women. Their conversation, carried on first by mail and then at two tape-recorded retreats, has now become a beautiful book of reflections illustrated by Veronica Harms. Rosalee Bender, Eileen Klassen Hamm, Wendy Kroeker, Carol Penner, Valerie Regehr, Gloria Neufeld Redekop and Kathy Shantz “heard one another into speech.” The book continues the transformative work started in their initial conversation.

To many people, peace means “not war,” so peace theology has been on the back burner in many Mennonite churches. The prevailing view in any case is that theology is carried on in seminaries and institutions of higher learning, not in the details of everyday life. However, the seven women engaged in this dialogue remember its root-meaning; theology

is God-talk and peace is a present and practical challenge in their lives:

We want to begin to reshape peace theology by naming the divine in the things we do, the places we live, who we are, what we're doing. As we name the divine in the specifics of our lives, we affirm that divinity is immanent. Divinity is expressed in our struggles and not in our certainties; in our journeys and not in our destinations. (28)

Although the conversationalists have a couple of doctorates, an M.Div and a Master's degree in Theology, this book is not “head-talk.” All of the women are married and have children. They have found that peace must be embodied in family and church life. Their discussions are far removed from the peace theologies they studied in college and seminary. Love is surely the source of the life and energy that flows through the book: love of children, of family, of one another, of God.

Traditional theology has followed the academic conventions in suppressing the personal voice of the author. Opinion has been carefully divorced from personal pronouns, presented in the formal distanced rhetoric of objective discourse.

In contrast, *piecework* begins with personal introductions and continues with a short narrative about the first retreat. The next section, “home as a piece of the world made peaceful,” continues the narrative but moves into an explanation of the personal symbols each woman brought to the retreats – symbols that Veronica Isaak Harms incorporates into the cover design and into the title pages of the different sections, also using variations of them as watermarks on some pages.

The framing narrative moves seamlessly into the discussion of “who is God in the midst of our peace work?” and “doing theology in the

context of our lives." These women acknowledge that their theology will have to include violence as a "when," not as a "what if," and they talk of intellectual and academic as well as physical violence. (All male pastors and academics should read at least this chapter, a window on the lives of the women in their congregations and classes.)

Subsequent discussions include paragraphs on transformation, diversity, community, and changing the church. The book ends with a list of the books these women love.

With its sage-green cover and wide-margined buff pages, this is the most beautiful theology book I've ever seen. This beauty too speaks of peace – of taking time and space to create something lovely from simple materials, an act of worship that does not separate mind from heart nor heart from hand nor neighbour from neighbour. The book has wide margins so that readers can carry on the conversation or organize their own theological conversation through mail and retreat. Thus we can experience the privilege of joining the conversation.

Copies of this book may be purchased from provincial MCC offices or by phoning 1-888-622-6337.

The Secret Wish of Nannerl Mozart

by Barbara Kathleen Nickel,
Second Story Press, 1996. 195 pages.

Reviewed by Janet E. Boldt

This is a story about a young girl's coming of age. Beginning with her twelfth birthday party, the novel traces the unfolding of her dreams and aspirations. As Nannerl, the sister of the child prodigy Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, blows out her birthday candles, she makes a wish for "purple gowns, a new wig every day of the year, a room of my own, and to be the

most famous composer in the world!"

Using a combination of fact and fiction, Nickel weaves her plot around Nannerl's dreams of fame. Disappointment is inevitable, since Nannerl's aspirations are out of synch for a young girl living in the 18th century, yet one is quickly drawn into the heart of this one who, like all children, dreams of recognition.

Born in a time when young women's opportunities were clearly demarcated by gender roles, Nannerl has the dual blessing and bane of being sister to the famous Wolfgang. She experiences the age old female dilemma of being compared to a brother. Nannerl's musical opportunities are limited to playing clavier and singing, whereas her brother is given lessons on every musical instrument and is continuously encouraged to compose music.

The family embarks on a three-year musical performing tour so their father can show off his "Wunderkindern." With growing aspiration, Nannerl

clandestinely learns to play violin and composes a symphony which she dreams of performing before Johann Christian Bach. While her brother receives both encouragement and accolades, Nannerl silently continues dreaming and working on her symphony.

The outcome of the story is delightful. This is "the story that could have been," had Nannerl's musical genius been recognized alongside that of her famous brother.

Captivating for both youthful and adult readers, this novel goes beyond traditional history to explore the inner landscape of a talented young girl dreaming of being a famous composer. In addition, valuable historical insights are provided by the chronology, glossary and list of sources included in the book

A highly recommended read for children of all ages!

Janet Boldt is an instructor at Columbia Bible College in Clearbrook, BC.

New Writers Contest – Deadline Extended

Sophia is pleased to announce our second New Writers Contest. Contestants must not have written for *Sophia* before. Submissions should be a maximum of 800 words, typed. Please include name, title of article, address and phone number on a separate piece of paper. Do not put name on article. Submissions will not be returned. **Deadline for submissions is extended to December 31, 1998.**

A \$50 prize will be awarded for each of the four best entries, which will be published in a future issue of *Sophia*. Runners-up may also be invited to have their submissions published. Writing should be in one of the following categories:

1. **Life Writing.** A thoughtful account of a personal experience, a biographical story about a woman you know, or a life's experience recounted through letters or in diary / journal format.
2. **A Reflection from Scripture.** Of particular interest is interpretation of Scriptures about female characters or from a female perspective.
3. **My Experience As a Christian Woman at the End of the Twentieth Century.** A reflection on how you see your life and experience (or a particular facet of your experience) as a woman and a Christian in the present age; how this relates to your past and/or your future; what you see as the most important issues facing you in your daily life or your future.
4. **A Theme of your choice.**
5. **A Short Story.**

Address your submissions to *Sophia*: P.O. Box 28062, 1453 Henderson Hwy., Winnipeg, MB, R3G 4E9.



"OLD HOUSE," SHAWNIGAN LAKE, BC / © 1998 HENRY PRICE

*"There I will give her
back her vineyards,
and will make the
Valley of Trouble a door of hope."*

HOSEA 2:15 NIV