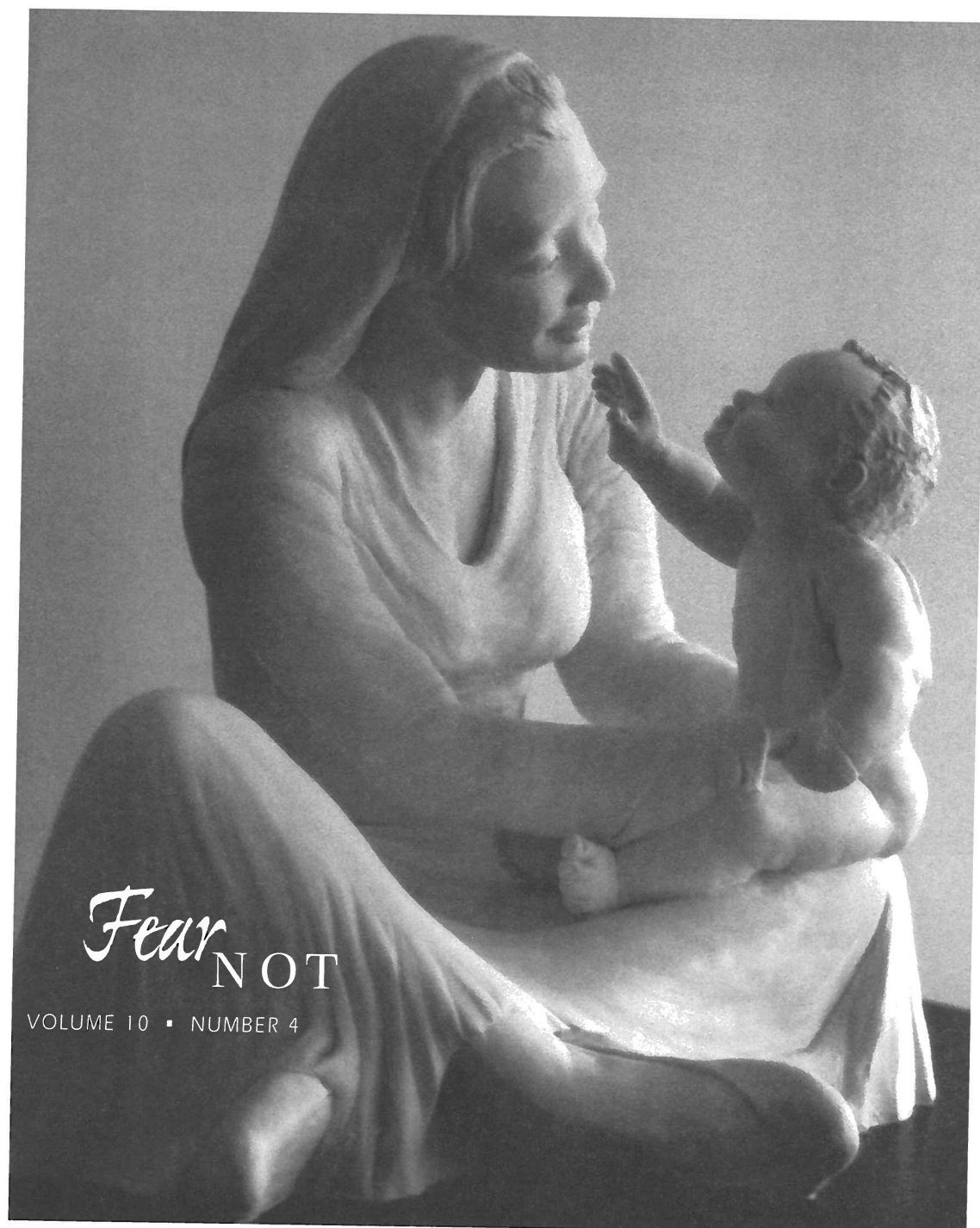


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# S O P H I A

W I S D O M

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



*Fear* NOT

VOLUME 10 • NUMBER 4

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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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**Publisher** Estér DeFehr

**Editor** Lori Matties

**Editorial Committee**

Jean Reimer

Lis Vensel, Lorie Battershill

Helga Doermer

**Circulation** Hanny Labun

**Layout/Design**

Darrell Dyck, *Pegasus Design*

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**Sophia Board**

Estér DeFehr - *co-chair*

Esther Reimer - *treasurer*

Christine Enns, Hanny Labun

Tina Fehr Kehler, Mary Friesen

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SOPHIA

P.O. Box 28062

RPO North Kildonan

Winnipeg, MB R2G 4E9

fax: (204) 668-2527

e-mail: [lmatties@escape.ca](mailto:lmatties@escape.ca)

phone: (204) 339-5668

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## CONTENTS

### Editorial

- 3 Climbing the Wall  
- Lori Matties

### Features

- 10 I Will Change Your Name  
- Jean Reimer
- 16 Special Relationships - Anne Martens
- 20 Finding Our Way Home - Carol MacPherson

### Columns

- 4 From the Source  
Do Not Be Afraid - Erica Block
- 8 Images of God  
Born of God - Helga Doermer
- 12 Voices From the Past  
Sara Balzer: "A Sister's Experience" - Dora Dueck

- 18 Unspeakable Issues  
The Rape of Tamar  
- Lori Matties
- 22 A Brother's Perspective  
Fear Not - Brian Unruh
- 23 Shelf Life  
*Swing Low*  
*Heart of Flesh: A Feminist Spirituality for Women and Men*

### Poetry

- 9 Night Passages - Lori Matties
- 17 These Women - Joan Bond

### 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).

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- Demonstrate integrity in all relationships.
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- Respect the environment.
- Support our community.
- Strive for excellence in all we do.

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**On the Cover:** This photo and several others throughout the issue represent the sculptures of Helen E. Norman. Please see her bio on page 7. Note also the new writers contest announcement on page 7.



## EDITORIAL

# Climbing the Wall

by Lori Matties

Last fall, on a warm, sunny Saturday afternoon, my family and I were at a church retreat. Many of us were sitting on picnic tables watching our children at the climbing wall, being coaxed and encouraged to the top. I watched curiously, remembering my own experiences at age 17, rock climbing and rappelling at Pioneer Camp in Alberta.

Several of the kids climbed easily up the wall, but several others reached halfway and then stopped, unable to coax themselves higher. After a few words of encouragement, the belayer let them bounce their way down to the safety of the ground.

My curiosity got the better of me. I decided I wanted to try the wall. My two kids had bounded up like billy goats. I found a helmet, harnessed myself into the rope and began to climb, maneuvering my way up the little hand- and footholds with relative ease.

Exactly halfway up, my stomach started to knot. The ground was a long way off. The top seemed impossibly far away. I felt like a fly on the wall but without sticky pads to secure me. Doubts swarmed. Why was I doing this? What was so great about climbing a wall anyway? This wasn't fun – it was too scary. It wasn't sensible. "I want to come down," I said.

"What's stopping you from continuing?" asked the belayer. "You're doing very well. You're nearly there. Just move your hand to that handhold on your right, then move your foot to that one on your left. You're doing fine."

My family and the others shouted encouraging words. I tried to

think of how my son had bounded up without a thought. I took one more step. Those at the bottom kept on encouraging, and I made it to the top.

Bouncing down the wall, I was triumphant. I was so pleased, not just because I had made it but because for this one time I had pushed through my fear and accomplished what I set out to do. Lately, as I have looked back at the major turning points of my life, I've become conscious that fear has denied me some wonderful experiences and opportunities. It's good to know that, and to begin to exercise courage, even in small things like climbing a wall.

I think listening to God has a lot to do with pushing through fear. I can see God as a belayer, talking me through the terror that knots my stomach and clogs my mind with doubts, encouraging me to take that one more step of faith, reminding me about the rope harness that will never let me fall. "On their hands," the psalmist writes of God's angels, "they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone" (Ps 91:12 NRSV).

Courage is about facing the unknown, trusting God to bring us through whatever circumstances we face – even to take us on adventures we have never dreamed possible – and to transform our fear into joy. It is no surprise that several of the articles in this issue on fear reflect on aspects of the angel Gabriel's appearance to Mary to bring news of the coming of Jesus. Mary's story stands large as an example to us of one who faced her fear and became God's agent for the renewal of the world. We have no stronger image of courage against great odds. We have no clearer

picture of the transformative power of a God who is bent on rescuing the world. "Do not be afraid," the angel still says to those who are willing to hear, "I am bringing good news" (Luke 2:10).



With this issue we introduce yet another new column, "Unspeakable Issues," in which we will explore two things: those difficult issues we so much need to discuss and yet often find difficult to talk about, and biblical themes that have long been neglected or misrepresented. Our hope is that through breaking the silence we can find constructive ways through these difficult subjects, and even ways of moving toward hope and healing for those who have been hurt by them. We welcome your comments. May God grant us wisdom and grace.

We also welcome Tina Fehr Kehler and Mary Friesen to the *Sophia* collective. Tina is working on a Masters degree in sociology at the University of Manitoba. She and her husband, Bud, live in Altona with their one-year-old son, Griffin. They are members at the Altona Mennonite Church. Tina is the Chair of the Women's Concerns Committee, MCC Manitoba. Mary recently resigned as vice-principal at the Mennonite Brethren Collegiate Institute in Winnipeg and is currently taking the time to complete a Doctorate of Ministry at St. Stephen's College in Edmonton. She and her husband attend River East MB Church in Winnipeg, and they have two grown children.

# Do Not Be Afraid

by Erica Block

*The following is adapted from an advent sermon Erica gave at River East MB Church.*

**A**dvent: the gestational time, the preparation time for the coming of the incarnate God. Here, twenty centuries after the fact, we still continue to wait, to re-member and to re-enact our faith story, this story of God breaking into our world, coming to meet us and becoming one of us.

We can hardly overdramatize the magnitude of this event:

*"Mary, do not be afraid; you have won God's favor. Listen! You are to conceive and bear a son .... He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David; he will rule over the House of Jacob for ever and his reign will have no end. ... the child ... will be called Son of God." (Luke 2:30-33,36 Jerusalem Bible)*

In the wonder of this annunciation, we almost lose the admonition, "Do not be afraid." We see Mary recover quickly from the shock of being addressed by an angel, her instinctual fear turning to incredulity and then submission. The angel said more. Mary was not alone in this experience of angelic encounter. The impossible had already happened! There was another divine visitation and her cousin, elderly and childless, was pregnant!

These events had cosmic implications. This young woman, so ordinary and yet so extraordinary, so deeply rooted in Jewish piety and hope, became the vehicle of God for the fulfillment of ancient prophecies. "Do not be afraid," the angel said; and Mary released her fear and embraced instead the absolute wonder and mystery of the moment. With implicit trust in the voice and the working of God,

she said: "I am the handmaid of the Lord, ... let what you have said be done to me" (Luke 1:38). How can fear so quickly and unequivocally be transformed?

We hear those same words "Do not be afraid" echo over the dark hills outside Bethlehem nine months later. The angel first consoles the astonished shepherds: "Do not be afraid. Listen," and then makes the cosmic birth

announcement in chorus: "... a Savior has been born to you"! A full chorus of angels bursts into song: "Glory to God in the highest" (Luke 2:10-11,14).

Can we be captured by these words this Advent? What do they say to us as we live our daily lives in the reality of the incarnation? What did Mary fear? What did the shepherds fear?

Any movement of the supernatural stirs fear in most of us. Who of us has spoken with an angel? We pray, but do we really expect an incursion of God? The security of the ordinary and the predictable collapses in the face of angels. If we lose control of our ordinary world we live in fear. Don't we all live our lives on a fragile threshold?

As I was pondering the notion "do not be afraid," I remembered Marjorie, a friend from some time ago, another "music-lesson mom" from the days when I would

*Can we be captured by these words in Advent? What do they say to us as we live our daily lives in the reality of the incarnation?*



US VENSEL

drive our children to their lessons. This family had earlier lost their first daughter to a terminal illness. Now Marjorie's husband had been diagnosed with cancer. And he died within the year in their home, lovingly cared for by his family until his last breath.

I remembered this woman who had lost two of the people she loved most in this world to premature deaths, her daughter at age seven, her husband under fifty. I remembered her saying to us at a gathering after his funeral, her daughter's picture hanging there on the living room wall: "If I were to write a book, I would call it: *The Other Side of Fear*."

The Advent message invites us into a paradox in the midst of the fragility of our lives. We hear the admonition, "Do not be afraid," but there is another echo in the Advent drama. Mary speaks *these* words as she raises her voice in that wonderful poetry of praise: "his mercy reaches from age to age for those who fear him" (Luke 1:50). How do we juxtapose these apparently contradictory admonitions: "Do not be afraid!" and "Fear God!"? What does it mean, "Do not be afraid"? How do we live with fear? When is fear holy? And what is the other side of fear?

The starting point for fear is in our minds. Richard Rohr writes: "Isn't it baffling that fear is located in the head – and not, say, in the gut or in the heart? As soon as you work with fear-obsessed persons, you notice that you're actually dealing with phantasms that persecute them. Apocalyptic scenarios are always running in their heads, visions of how everything could go wrong" (*Discovering the Enneagram*, New York, Crossroad, 1991, p 120).

A personal experience illustrates this dynamic. We were watching a movie, my husband and I, in the theatre. I was dealing with an ear problem at that time and had a deafness in one ear. This was a matter of some anxiety for me, as it had been going on for some time. As I was sitting there in the dark, with the loud, horrible sounds of battle in *The Messenger* filling the theatre and my ear buzzing, I put my hand over my ear. In doing so I felt the side of my eye. It seemed to me, in the crashing noises around me, that the side of my eye felt numb. My body was immediately flooded with fear washing over me, filling me. "Maybe I'm actually having a stroke. Maybe it's becoming more than my ear." It took repeated checking of my face and eye to reassure me that this indeed was not happening and that there really was no



LS VENSEL

numbness, and gradually the panic subsided.

Whether the movement of energy is in the body, as an instinct for flight or fight, we know that the reaction of fear is immediately taken over by the mind, which universalizes it to heighten the anxiety and make us *afraid*. God says. "Be not afraid," be not *stuck* in fear.

Yes. Fear is a God-given instinct. We are asked to pay attention to it, to be present to the process of experiencing fear and to move through it. "Be Not Afraid" is not a command to repress fear. Fear tells us that we are about to step into the unknown.

Think again of Mary. How amazing that the angel of God addressed her startled response. "Be not afraid," be not filled with fear, stay in the present. "Listen." In order to listen we need *first* to pay attention to our fear. How amazing that God cares about our fear.

The March/April 1999 issue of *Weavings* (a journal on spiritual life) came at a time of great need for me. Being one who easily attaches to fear, I desperately needed to find anchors as our family life spun crazily out of my control. Could I embrace and trust God in such a time of fear and uncertainty? Could I survive?

Robert Morris's article entitled "Holy Fear and the Wildness of God" touched me deeply. Could there in fact be consolation in acknowledging God as One who moves in ways I cannot fathom? Morris speaks of it in this way, and illustrates with a story from his own life: "My most effective baptism in life-giving fear and the sustaining goodness it can open us to – was initiated by a lightning bolt cleaving through the dark thunder of a steamy night to set fire to our house." He talks about the "war between panic and awe-struck fear," between wringing his hands in "panicky dread," and standing in "sober apprehension," taking in the scene. The moment of grace came, he said,



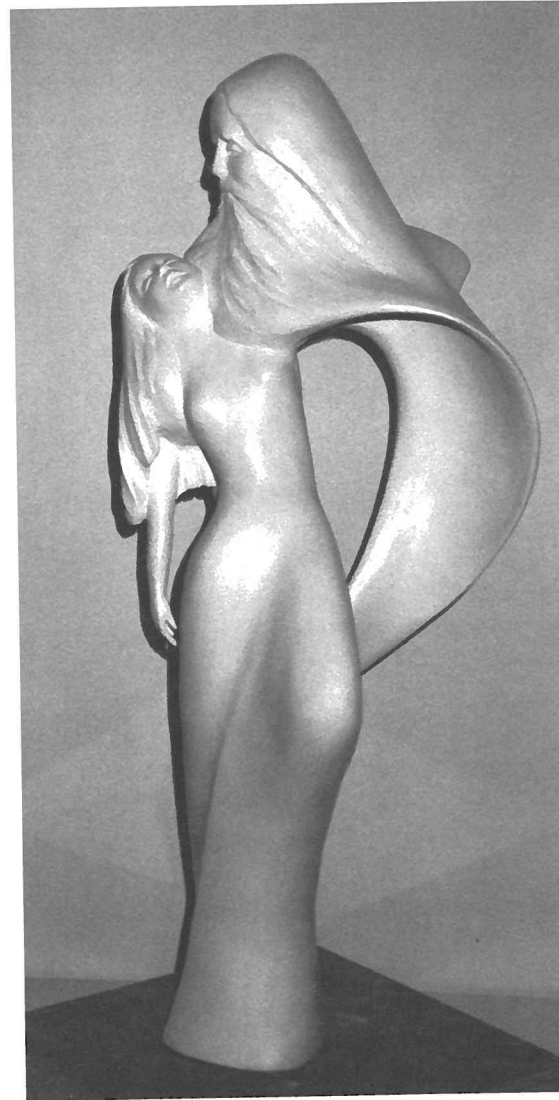
when "I had to face the awful possibility that the house actually might burn down. I had to choose between facing reality and being afraid. I do not know how the grace to do it came, but in that moment I was able to surrender the whole situation into the hands of God, come what might. *All right, I said to God, if we lose it all, we lose it all. We shall be then, as we are now, in the hands of the living God.*"

Holy fear can best be translated as "awe" or "reverential wonder" in the face of who God is, in God's holy mystery. It is based on respect, not anxiety. In order to live through my fear of the unknown and not to attach myself horribly to life-draining anxiety, in order to live with the greatest primal fear, the fear of death – the fear of the death of my daughter – I needed desperately to find that possibility and consolation expressed by Robert Morris, that no matter what happens, I will be in the hands of the living God, the God we see only through a mirror darkly. "Creation and creation's God are wild," Morris writes. Holy fear allows God to be God and somehow finds consolation in the fact that God hears our anxious fear with loving compassion and calls us to listen to God's voice. Holy fear can only bow and wait before the God who comes in the mystery of the incarnation – in human flesh – to share in our sorrows.

Let me return to Marjorie. Now, thirteen years later, I called her, and we met for lunch. I asked her to speak to me about "the other side of fear." It was a remarkable conversation. She spoke first of how she had told a friend some time after the birth of her first daughter that she had fallen in love with this child and could not see how she could live if anything were ever to happen to her. Then Marjorie said, "Ultimate fear became reality." She shared how she cared for this child who at age two had been given six months to live and who lived five more years. She spoke of how she was able to find strength to face the impossible; of finding courage to live with her child's life rather than her death. Marjorie could not name the strength she found, but she knew it as an energy, a spirit, that is in and around us, that we tap into when we need it – a power from another source. And when we call on it, she said, it is there. The other side of fear is *knowing* that there is strength to face the impossible.

And then, when the second time came and her husband became ill, Marjorie knew she would survive – and that she would survive with *joy*! "Once the body can no longer be healed, then we need to watch for growth in the spirit," she said. "I know that the physical translates into spirit. The essence doesn't disappear. I would not let life rob me of hope, of joy. Tragedy burns a groove into you..." "That only gives love a deeper place to reside?" I suggested. "Yes," she said.

"Do not be afraid," God says. Yes. We can dare to name God.



HELEN E. NORMAN

*Isn't this the consoling, challenging, deeply personal message of Advent – God breaking in, bringing light into the darkness of our dread?*

I asked others as well, "What is the other side of fear for you?" One said, "Celebration" (and we hear the echo of the angel, "Fear not, for behold I bring you tidings of great joy!"). Another person said, "The other side of fear is facing the fact that I'm not perfect. Fear is fear of not meeting our own expectations." A fourth person said, "The other side of fear is faith in the part of me rooted in God."

"Do not be afraid," do not be stuck in fear. Isn't this the consoling, challenging, deeply personal message of Advent – God breaking in, revealing Godself to us, bringing light into the darkness of our dread? As I sat with my fear,

I found in Psalm 91 the surprise. "If you live in the shelter of the Most High, and make your home in the shadow of the God of heaven, (then) you can say to Yahweh, 'My refuge, my fortress, my God in whom I trust!'" (v 1).

The other side of fear is *a conscious dwelling with God* with my whole being – my mind, my heart, my body – making my resting place the shadow of God. If I live in the Shadow, then I will know the consolation of God! Gradually I will find that peace begins to pervade my being, in spite of my fits and starts, and I can more than survive the storms of life. I will find joy daring to bubble up! The other side of fear is *faith* in a God who Is, whose breath holds the universe in balance, who appears to us as a helpless child, whose mercy reaches from age to age, whose reign has no end. The other side of fear is *knowing* that God does not abandon us. This God challenges us to not be afraid.

Continuously life gives us opportunities to face our fear; to have faith beyond what we can see. The unexpected happens, control is lost, illness strikes, the accident, the earthquake, the tornado, the airplane crash, the death.... No matter what happens, we are then, as we are now, in the hands of the living God. Glory to God in the highest. And on earth peace!

.....  
*Erica Block is taking a six-month leave of absence from her work with Pregnancy Distress Centre in Winnipeg to take a hospital chaplaincy course. She and her husband, Dan, are members of River East MB Church, and they have three grown children.*

### Helen Norman

The sculpture shown on the front cover and others in the magazine are by the well-known artist Helen E. Norman. A 1979 review in the Toronto Star marvels at her daring mid- life switch from hairdressing instructor (RRCC) and beauty salon owner to artist and sculptor. She graduated in Fine Arts from Camosum College (B.C.) and University of Manitoba. A gifted teacher, she taught drawing, sculpture and pottery to many groups in Manitoba, and also in England. One club in St. James called themselves the Norman Art Group in her honour.

Helen excels in sculpting the human figure in fired terracotta clay, her subjects including religious personages, portraits, and delightful human chess pieces. Works are commissioned by private clients or public places such as Holy Redeemer Church, Misericordia Hospital, or St. Benedict's where she spent several years as artist-in-residence. She now works at her home in Belair.

## New Writers Contest

*Sophia* is pleased to announce our third New Writers Contest. Contestants must not have written for *Sophia* before. Submissions should be a maximum of 800 words, typed. Please include your 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 FEBRUARY 1, 2001.

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. Note: articles of historical interest are preferred over tributes.

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 beginning of the Twenty-first 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. This can include a scholarly reflection or an opinion piece.

4. **A Theme suitable for one of the Columns of *Sophia*,** eg., "Unspeakable Issues," "Images of God" or a book review for "Shelf Life."

5. **A Short Story.**

Address your submissions to : P.O. Box 28062, R.P.O. North Kildonan, Winnipeg, MB, R2G 4E9.

## Born of God

by Helga Doermer

*In* our women's experience, we may conceive of womb only as bearing life. Yet as symbol it is more than the fertile ground of conception wherein new being is cradled and fed until it is ready to be birthed out. It is a place that holds the powers of mystery and transformation. I can remember my sense of amazement at first knowing that my body held the embryo of a being. I marvelled at the mystery of life bearing life. I remember those first awesome stirrings of that life – the faint evanescent flutter, now here, now gone so quickly I wondered if it was real or only my maternal imagination. I remember the hope and apprehension entwined as the unseen unfolded with burgeoning life within my body. I remember those half conscious moments of gently stroking my swelling belly, cognizant of the deep maternal bonding to the one I carried within. I remember the waiting and waiting, willing the conception of love to be born in perfection – symbol of our union, man and woman. I remember the growing anticipation, trepidation, as my time drew near. And my life was forever changed.

Is there a human love greater than that of a woman for the life she willingly conceived within her body? Is there a more intimate connection with another human being than that which we encompass within ourselves – protecting and nourishing the fragile fetus until it is strong enough to be born into another world? Can we conceptualize this intimate, nourishing, protective womb of love as a possible metaphor for the eternal, inclusive, expansive love of God? Can we find a more powerful human metaphor for the intimacy of God's love toward the inhabitants of the earth?

I responded with a sense of amazement to an introduction through scriptural stories to God portrayed as conceiving humanity and birthing the world from God's womb. Moses appears to be referring to God's conception and birthing of the Hebrew people as he complains to God:

"Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child...?' (Num 11:12, NRSV).

The image of the Hebrew people as born of God gains strength in Deuteronomy 32:18. In this passage Moses reprimands a refractory people: "You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you, and you forgot the God who gave you birth." Clearly he addresses them as people to whom God gave birth.

The book of Job portrays a picture of God birthing a people, but more than that also birthing the world: "Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind: "...who shut in the sea with doors, when it burst out from the womb? ...who has begotten the drops of dew? From whose womb did the ice come forth, and who has given birth to the hoarfrost of heaven?" (Job 38:1,8,28-29).

The image of a people and a world birthed from God's womb draws me to the story of the encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus (John 3:1-12). I wonder if Nicodemus, like us, suffered from an inability to imagine being born of God. You may have wondered at his puzzled response when Jesus said to him: "Very truly,

I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit" (v 5). Yet, Nicodemus must have been a brilliant and learned man. I can relate to his response, wondering how one can be born again. When I've attempted to understand the heart of the meaning of being born again, I've been confronted with a fragmented metaphor. Like Nicodemus, we've experienced human birth. This is a birth in which we know ourselves to have been born of the womb of someone into another life. It really isn't surprising that he wondered how another birth could take place. What or whom are we born of? From what womb does the second birth take place?

Last winter, I read the story of Jesus and Nicodemus again. I stayed with Jesus' words for a while: "Very truly, I



HELEN E. NORMAN

*Is there a human love greater than that of a woman for the life she willingly conceived within her body?*



tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (vv 5-8).

As I entered into the mystery of Jesus' words, I began to play with them. The phrase "born of water and Spirit" particularly intrigued me. As if in a dream, two parallel portrayals of water and spirit arose. We truly do encounter two births, both of water and of spirit/Spirit. Our first birth, which we know of but cannot remember, is in the rush of amniotic fluid as we leave our mothers' bodies and encounter the world. Of vital importance to our survival is drawing in the breath of life (spirit). The second birth is encountered by conscious and deliberate choice. We step into/through the baptismal waters, an image of being born again, and we breath in the Breath of Life (Spirit). Another fragment of the metaphor of the second birth, Spiritual birth, took shape. When I stumbled across biblical images of the womb of God, it was as if encountering the missing piece of a puzzle. Suddenly, being "born of God," a statement used freely by the writer of 1 John, became a more comprehensive metaphor, grounded in the womb of God (see 1 John 3:9, 4:7, 5:4,18). Nicodemus must have been aware of entering into Mystery when he asked Jesus how one can be born again. His question arose out of his human experience. If in our first birth we are born from a physical womb, the metaphor of a Spiritual womb – the womb of God – helps us to comprehend our spiritual birth.

I cannot remember the experience of becoming in my mother's womb. I cannot remember the mysterious process of development, of being transformed from a tiny cell to a fully formed being. Yet, I wonder if it was not the most secure experience of my human history. If I close my eyes and imagine being cradled in the womb of God and being birthed out of Spirit, I find a comprehensive frame of reference for being "born of God" into salvation. References to the transformative experience of life in the Spirit finds a parallel in the mystery of the new creation of human life. The unfathomable love of God finds itself reflected in the depths of a mother's love. Imagine being conceived in and born out of the unfathomable love of God's womb – intimate, nourishing, protective, inclusive, expansive and eternal love.

.....  
*Helga Doermer, a member of Sophia's editorial committee, is currently studying toward a Master of Divinity degree at the University of Winnipeg.*

## Night Passages

by Lori Matties

(John 3:1-15; 18:39)

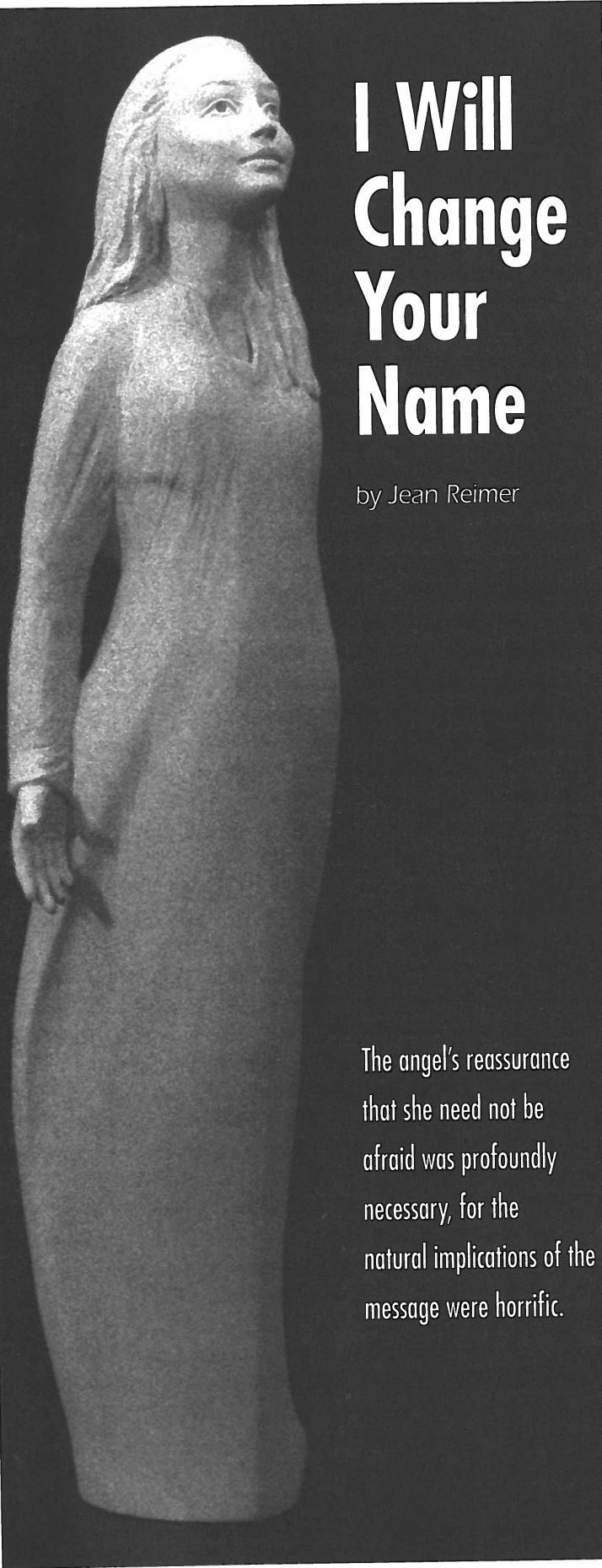
When you came by night  
 (as I come, soul weary,  
 a barren womb  
 longing to be filled),  
 you thought you knew something,  
 your search stretched out behind you  
 like live entrails –  
 a life long of asking  
 and answering  
 and treading on ancient stones  
 set before and behind  
 for the building  
 of a solid edifice.

You thought you knew something  
 (as I know,  
 filling my life  
 with empty expectations,  
 vain labour,  
 and no relief of birth in sight),  
 and it was hard to think  
 of leaving all that  
 to go where the wind blows,  
 to travel that wordless, screaming passage  
 and risk remembering  
 what memory mercifully declines to recall.

But you risked it, Nicodemus.  
 And in the bloody afterbirth,  
 when he was lifted up,  
 you brought a cradleful of spices.

Was it something he said,  
 a sign more sure  
 than the wisdom of sages?  
 Or did you simply long  
 as I do,  
 hearing the sound of that sweet wind,  
 to enter its streams and be blown through,  
 swept clean  
 to dress this weary world anew?

.....  
*This poem was first published in **Born Giving Birth: Creative Expressions of Mennonite Women**, Newton, Kansas, Faith and Life Press, 1991.*



# I Will Change Your Name

by Jean Reimer

The angel's reassurance that she need not be afraid was profoundly necessary, for the natural implications of the message were horrific.

**M**ary, the most highly honoured woman's name in Christendom. Mary, the name of God's chosen vessel for the greatest gift to fallen humankind – God's Son, Jesus. Because of this woman, the name "Mary" evokes for us today a sense of glorious distinction and divine favour.

It was not always so – in Mary's time 2000 years ago, the name fell harshly on the ear: in Hebrew it meant "bitterness, unpleasantness; or rebellion." In the Near East of those days, names could be descriptive: perhaps of the person's character or physical makeup, of circumstances at their birth or events in their personal life; sometimes it reflected events in the larger world; sometimes the name was prophetic. Names were also passed down through family lines.

The Greek meaning of "Mary" is the same as the Hebrew *Mara'*, which is the name Naomi took for herself in her grievous circumstances. The book of Ruth is really the story of Naomi, and it revolves around the names that Naomi took to herself. "Naomi" means "pleasant"; thus when Naomi experienced the bitter grief of losing not only her husband but also her only two sons, she changed her name to Mara<sup>2</sup> ("bitter things, misery, grief"). Her great loss also left her without an heir to continue the family line. "Don't call me Naomi, call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me" (Ruth 1:20-21 NIV).

Centuries later we find her namesake, Mary, in an epoch that was bitterly unpleasant for all the Hebrews. They lived in the aftermath of the Maccabean revolt against the Syrians, in which the Maccabees had reclaimed the temple in Jerusalem and established themselves in the office of the High Priest. In the 160 years following that rebellion, bitter tensions and internal turmoil had grown up among the Hebrews as three types of authority came into question and into conflict: that of foreign domination, that of the Maccabean family now occupying the high priestly office, and that of the Torah. The temple in Jerusalem was being rebuilt by Herod the Great, a non-Jew and a ruthless, ungodly ruler. That Mary was a common name of that era should not surprise us, for it reflected the bitter circumstances the Hebrews were collectively experiencing; they were waiting passionately for matters to change in their lives and in the nation.

Mary bore this unhappy name throughout her young life, until the angel of the Lord spoke to her, and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women."<sup>3</sup> It is not astonishing

HELEN E. NORMAN

that Mary was thoroughly shaken by this greeting – dumbfounded not only by an angel appearing to her but by the words he used to address her. And in the wake of astonishment, terror. The angel's reassurance that she need not be afraid was profoundly necessary, for the natural implications of the message were horrific: Mary was a virgin betrothed to a righteous man; to be found pregnant before marriage normally meant that a religiously zealous fiancé would have her judged publicly and stoned as an adulteress. If from pity he did not have her killed, she and her child would live their entire lives outcast and condemned. Yet in faith she accepts this daunting, incredible commission.

When she meets Elizabeth, Mary's jubilant song of praise echoes the turn-around in the story of Naomi. What happened to Naomi after she renamed herself "Mara"? A most wonderful thing: Boaz arrived on the scene. Boaz – Naomi's kinsman-redeemer. A kinsman-redeemer was obliged to redeem land in danger of being sold outside the family, and also to marry a childless widow of the family in order to keep her former husband's name and inheritance alive through an heir. Boaz married Ruth, and Ruth bore a son; Naomi took the child and placed him in her lap, signifying that the child henceforth belonged to her as her husband, Mahlon's, heir. The women living there acknowledged the changes in "Mara's" circumstances by renaming her: "Naomi has a son," and they praised God, saying, "Praise be to the Lord, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer. May the child renew your life and sustain you in your old age" (Ruth 4:17,14-15).<sup>4</sup> The "Mara" of emptiness and bitterness had become the "Naomi" of fullness and pleasure.

Gabriel's message to Mary was brief: "Your nation's kinsman-redeemer will come! You shall call his name Jesus [Jehovah saves]." And Mary, upon meeting Elizabeth, hears those wonderful, sweet words, "Blessed are you among women, blessed is the child you will bear, blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!" Mary bursts out in incredulous, exultant joy: "My spirit rejoices in God my Saviour! Henceforth all generations will call me blessed." In other words, "God has changed my name! Don't call me Mary anymore; call me *blessed*!"

"Blessed" means "fortunate, supremely happy, beautified."<sup>5</sup> It is the same paean of praise that Hannah sang when she brought her son Samuel to the temple. In bitterness [*mara*'] of soul Hannah had prayed for a son; God brought her out of her misery and gave her Samuel, and through Samuel, great blessing to the nation of Israel

(see 1 Sam 1,2). Mary's song is modelled after Hannah's song – a song of victory over enemies, a song of fullness after emptiness, a song of a coming king.

God is in the business of giving us new names, of putting the divine name into ours. When God cut the covenant with Abram and Sarai, God put part of the holy name *Yahweh* into theirs, changing them to Abraham and Sarah.<sup>6</sup> When God made Jacob the head of the Hebrew nation, Jacob was given the new name *Israel* with God's name '*El*' in it (as in '*Elohim*').<sup>7</sup> Joshua [*Yehôwshû'a*], who led the Hebrews into the promised land, means "Jehovah-saves" (the same word as "Jesus" in Greek).<sup>8</sup> Samuel means "God heard."<sup>9</sup>

And what God did for Naomi, for Hannah, for Mary, and for the nation of Israel, God also does now for us. Through the Son God changes our name: "I am coming soon; hold fast to what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. If you conquer, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God; you will never go out of it. I will write on you the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem..., and my own new name" (Rev.3:11-12 NRSV).

.....  
*Jean Reimer, a member of Sophia's editorial committee, formerly worked in translation and literacy in West Africa. She now lives in Steinbach, MB, and continues to work with Wycliffe Bible Translators. She is a member of Cornerstone Bible Church in Steinbach and Church of the Way in Winnipeg.*

1 *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, James Strong, (MacDonald Publ. Co., McLean, Virginia). "Mary" in Greek is "Maria" (#3137, p 46 of the Greek Dictionary), and in Hebrew "Miryâm" (#4813 and #4805, p 72 of the Hebrew Dictionary).

2 "Miryâm" comes from the Aramaic root [*mârâ*'] and the Hebrew root [*mârâh*] which means "bitter things, injury, hurt, misery, wretchedness, grief; or discontent, rebellion, hostility." Brown, Francis, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1977), p 600.

3 Luke 1:26-56, NIV, v 28 KJV with author's paraphrase.

4 NIV with author's paraphrase.

5 In Greek, "makarizo." Strong's, #3106, p 46 of the Greek Dictionary.

6 Genesis 17:5,15-16.

7 Genesis 32:29. Strong's, #3478, p 53 of the Hebrew Dictionary.

8 Strong's, #3091, p 48 of the Hebrew Dictionary.

9 Strong's, #8050, p.118 of the Hebrew dictionary.

# Sara Balzer: "A Sister's Experience"

by Dora Dueck

*One day in 1898, Sara Balzer, 45, of Mountain Lake, Minnesota, sat down and wrote a long account of her conversion and her husband's recent death. She sent it to the Zionsbote, the weekly paper of the American Mennonite Brethren, where it was published 28 September 1898 as "A Sister's Experience." This is what she said (translated from German, with paragraph breaks added):*

**A**lready from my youth<sup>1</sup> God's Spirit worked in my heart, though I didn't know what it was. My dear mother had taught me to pray and also often told us children that we should not fall asleep without praying, which I tried faithfully to do, but it did not satisfy me. When I was 15 I had a nervous breakdown and was sick eight weeks. When I became well again I determined to lead a completely different life, but unfortunately I could not do it, for I tried in my own strength and soon realized that I was doing worse and became aware that I was on the broad way.<sup>2</sup> Besides this I also had a great fear of being [eternally] lost, and often sought solitary spots and cried and prayed much, though my frivolous nature did not reveal any of this.

When I was 19, I also went to [baptismal] classes and it was my heart's earnest desire then to attain salvation; at that time too I cried and prayed much. I memorized #476 from the hymn book and then often prayed its words ... I longed to have rest and peace in my heart, for I felt keenly the burden of my sin and I thought once I had received baptism then it would be lighter, but it made no difference. At that time nothing was said about the possibility of having our sins forgiven.

In 1874 I was married<sup>3</sup> but the longing for salvation remained in me. We talked about this with each other but told no one else.

In 1876 we migrated to America. After three days of travel, our baby boy died, 10 months old, which was almost unbearable for us. It was pitch dark as he was carried outside. The train stopped for only 5 minutes.<sup>4</sup> Oh how painful this was for us.... As I struggled with this and begged the loving Lord to send me some comfort from his Word, so I could surrender myself to his will, these words

came to me: "And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom." [Lk 16:22] Because our child could not be buried, this was a great comfort to me. The Lord really drew us to himself at that time.

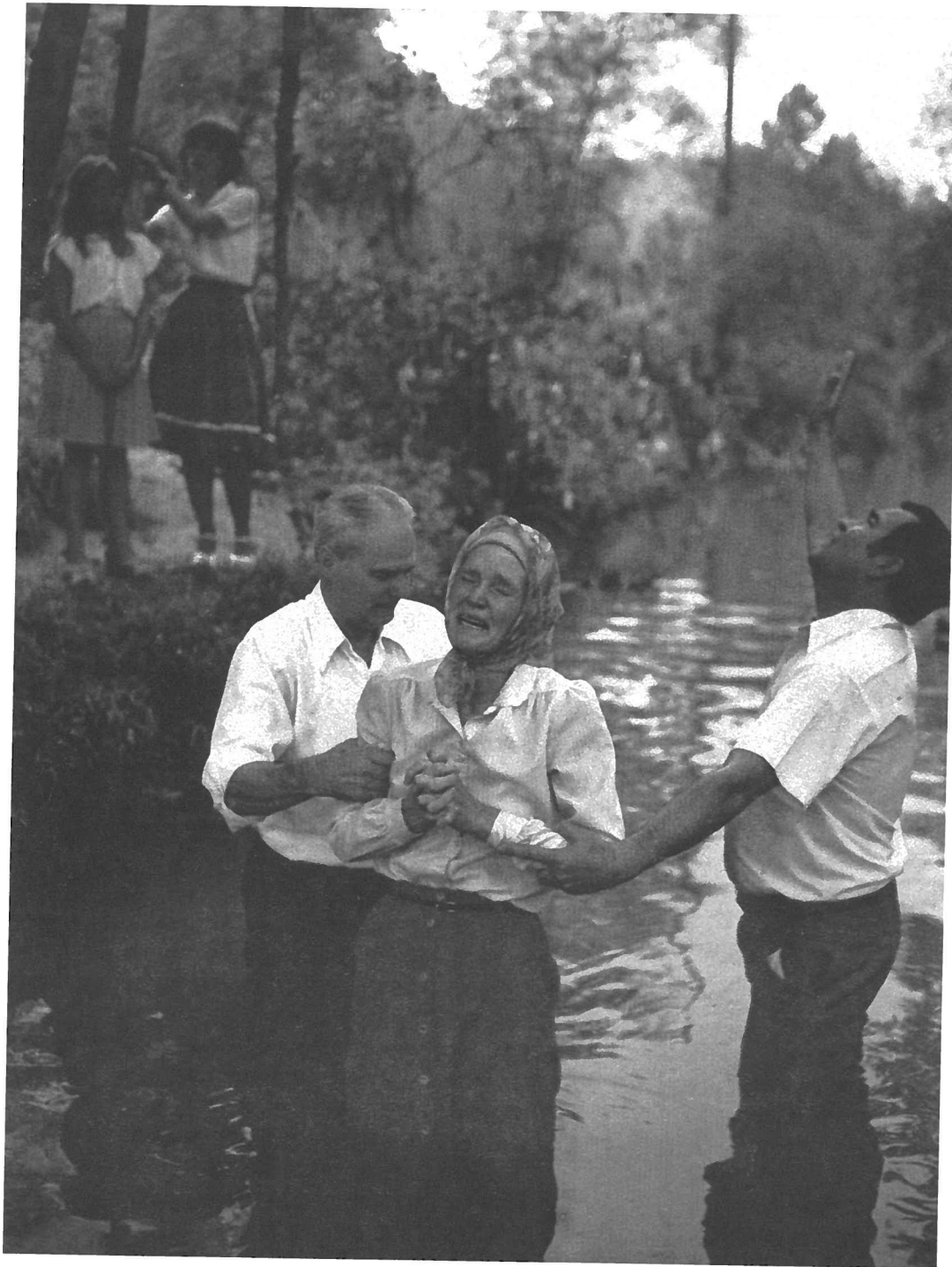
When we first arrived here in Mountain Lake ... how dreary everything looked: the grasshoppers had taken everything, and we often promised ourselves, if we could just have food and clothing and a small shelter, we would be contented. The Lord granted us this, that we could soon have a place here also to earn our livelihood, but he did not cease working in our hearts by his Spirit. I always felt within myself that I was too wicked, that for me there was no longer grace. I felt keenly my spiritual lostness; we prayed together much and searched in God's Word; we were also able to receive some comfort, for example, where it says, "A bruised reed I will not break, and a dimly burning wick I will not quench." [Isa 42:3]

For a time I had great anxiety and severe temptation when I prayed, could only cry and say the words, "God be merciful to me a sinner." But suddenly, one day as I was again overtaken by such great fear, it came to me: "In the world you have fear, but be of great cheer, I have overcome the world." [Jn 16:33] Then I fell down in repentance and shame and thanked the dear Lord, for I felt the burden was gone from my heart. Oh how happy I was at that time, that I could appropriate God's Word like that .... A year and a half later my dear husband also received forgiveness ....

Because we read much in God's Word and because salvation was a serious matter to us, we soon also discovered that we should let ourselves be baptized yet<sup>5</sup> .... We were buried in Christ's death through baptism on October 29, 1882. As we walked to the water, the song "Jesus, Guide our Way" was sung. I was especially struck by the verse: "Though difficult our way,/ Steadfast let us be,/ Even in the hardest days/ Firmly, uncomplaining,/ For through adversity/ Lies the way to Thee." Over time I have learned to understand this more than I understood it then ....

In 1885 misfortune struck us when we were burned out through lightning; everything burned except the livestock. It was painful for us to stand by, almost naked. We then went along with my [relatives] for the night and since

*It came to me: "In the world you have fear, but be of great cheer, I have overcome the world."*



I couldn't sleep at all that night, I got up and went outside and gave free rein to my tears. It was June 20 and quite a cold night and because I was wearing everything I owned, I was filled with worry, but Matthew 6:25, 26 became a comfort to me, that the heavenly Father would care for us; and he did too, thanks to him for it.

In 1886 the Lord took all our four children.<sup>6</sup> There we were, lonely and forsaken; often we had to ask, Why Lord? But there was nothing to do but yield ourselves to God's

will. The Lord sought to draw us nearer to himself and oh how often he let us feel his presence, blessed hours indeed....

[A]bout five years ago [my husband] got a heart condition and though we employed much medical help, it was all in vain. [H]e was able to be up and do light work until last summer, then he could hardly tolerate any food anymore and was so short of breath; he often said perhaps his end would come suddenly, but I

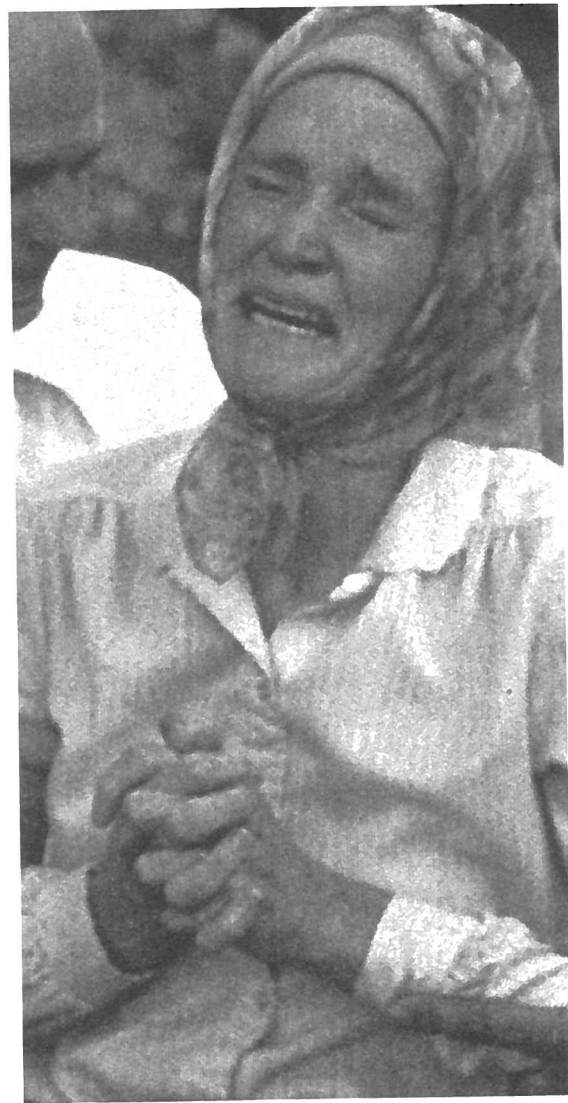
could not believe the Lord would take such a way with me, it seemed impossible. I prayed much ... and also firmly believed that it was a small thing for the Lord to give my dear husband health, but it turned out differently.

One week before his home-going [death] he said it seemed urgent to him that he put his house in order.<sup>7</sup> I could not comprehend it and said, "What shall I do alone then with the little children?" I also do not believe the Lord will take you from us." Then he said his heart was so afraid when he thought about soon appearing before God's face, it would only be grace if he were saved, for he had nothing to show for himself. Then we knelt and prayed and my dear husband asked especially, if it was God's will that he depart from here, that God would give him the grace to meet him joyfully. After praying he said he felt lighter ....

He was very short of breath; he could no longer sleep at night, nearly always had to sit up. I often got up at night and then found him sitting at the table with the Bible; it distressed me so that we could all sleep peacefully and he always had to sit up, but he was so calm.... Saturday night to Sunday I was overcome with such fear and my chest hurt me so much that I groaned in prayer: "Lord, what's the matter, surely I'm not steel or stone that you have to take such a way with me." I implored the Lord to give me strength to yield to his will. I did not want to add to my dear husband's suffering by not being able to let go of him.

In the morning he was again very short of breath and said, "I will suddenly be gone and have not put my house in order." When he was breathing somewhat easier again, he said: "Now I have to order my affairs." Again I could scarcely comprehend it, but he said, "Mama, we've reached that point." Only someone who has experienced this understands how I felt. Then I told him my experience of that night and how we had to let go of one another. Then he shared with me his thoughts about what would be best for me and our children.... He [said] the Lord would have special grace for me to bear whatever comes.... Oh brothers and sisters, I will never forget that Sunday, how heartbreaking and yet blessed it was.

In the afternoon we read the Word together: "There remains therefore a rest for the people of God." [Heb 4:9] Several times he said, "How blissful a rest it will be, when I am finally able to enter the rest prepared for the children of God." It seems I still hear him saying it. Then we knelt side by side and thanked the loving Saviour for all the blessings he had given us together and asked for further



*We knelt side by side and thanked the living Saviour for all the blessings he had given us together.*

help in our situation. It was the last time we bent our knees together. When we rose from prayer, my husband was very happy and said, "We already enjoy heavenly food here!" I could only cry. He looked at me so kindly and said he loved me very much and felt so relieved that I would let him go if this was God's will.

Monday morning was very difficult again, he had to sit before the open window.... Toward evening he said his spirit already lingered above. His breathing became easier. At 8:30 he asked if it wasn't time to close the day<sup>9</sup> and immediately began to pray. He prayed so clearly and committed us all to the loving Saviour and requested that



the entrance through heaven's gate would remain clear and open for him... [we sang a song] then he said, "Soon, soon, the struggle is finished." Now he felt so tired and wanted to sleep; we settled him as comfortably as possible in the rocking chair and soon he had sunk into a sweet sleep, a peaceful sleep like he had not had in two months, ... and because we did not sit up with him, we did not notice when, peacefully, without movement or sound, death broke the bond of marriage<sup>10</sup> ....

Five weeks after my dear husband's death I got sore eyes. Two weeks later the Lord gave me a baby son and my eyes got considerably worse .... After six weeks, through medical help, my eyes got better. Oh how thankful I was when I could once again look after those the Lord had entrusted to me, but how much it hurts that the head is no longer in the family; but in looking to Jesus, who has faithfully led me until now, I can firmly believe that this way also will be beneficial for me ... I have often been comforted by this song: "The heat of tribulation has shaken me,/ God himself fans the flame;/ Every heart quakes and trembles/ On this journey of suffering,/ Therefore I murmur, As God wills,/ And in the fire, hold still ..."

Warm greetings with Isaiah 43, I remain your sister in the Lord,  
Sara Balzer.

*I was first drawn to this account because it contains in one piece examples of two genres of writing often found in the turn-of-the century Zionsbote: the conversion story and the death story. Telling conversion stories effectively established the distinctives of the new Mennonite Brethren movement; conversions were a journey that began with dire spiritual unease and ended with baptism and membership in a new faith community.*

*Stories about dying were also very common. These often included, as does Sara's, descriptions of the person's physical state and various last gestures and words. It may seem astonishing to us that she would share publically so much of these final intimate interactions. Was putting them to paper therapeutic (to use current jargon) and a validation of their relationship, or were such stories simply what one expected of survivors?*

*I have also been mulling over the view of suffering that permeates this piece. "Misfortune" struck through lightning, Sara writes, but "the Lord took the children." Sara is a woman who uses biblical language as her own; was she thinking of Job*

1:21, "the Lord gave, the Lord took away"?

*Finally, I am struck by the character that emerges in this piece of autobiography. The "I" enters this story as rather unstable and fearful but leaves it much matured. Sara credits the faithfulness of God, a credit we can certainly accept, but she has also, probably unintentionally, exhibited her personal strength. She has learned, as she says, to "appropriate" what she believes.*

*From other sources<sup>11</sup> we discover that this impression of Sara's competence is a valid one. During the following difficult 12 years as a widow she successfully provided for her children's needs. "The results confirmed what she had done," stated her obituary. In 1909 Sara Balzer married the widower Abraham Buhler, leader of the MB church in Reedley, California. She died there, after a stroke, in July, 1919. The testimony above was the only one she wrote for the Zionsbote.*

.....  
*Dora Dueck is working toward a Master's degree in history at the University of Winnipeg. She and her husband, Helmut, have three children. They attend Jubilee Mennonite Church.*

## Notes

- 1 Her maiden name was Klassen; she was born and raised in Alexanderkrone, Molotschna Colony, South Russia.
- 2 The broad way that leads to destruction, from Matthew 7:13.
- 3 To Heinrich Balzer of Muntau, Molotschna Colony.
- 4 The child was given into strangers' hands for burial.
- 5 That is, re-baptized.
- 6 Katharina, 2, Bernhard, 7, and Sarah, 6, died within one week; a two-month-old daughter several months later. One report cites scarlet fever, another diphtheria. Besides the child on the journey, there had been 2 earlier deaths. At this time Heinrich and Sara were married 12 years; they had had 7 children and 7 deaths.
- 7 An expression for preparing to die.
- 8 At this time, they had 4 more children and Sara was pregnant.
- 9 *Schluss machen*, lit. making the close, referring to a devotional exercise at day's end.
- 10 He died 18 Jan 1898, age 45.
- 11 *Zionsbote* 15 Dec 1909 and 9 July 1919; *Mennonitische Rundschau* 26 May and 2 Jun 1886.

# Special Relationships

by Anne Martens

**My** special relationships are usually with women. They most often happen without my willing it to be so. I'm usually petrified in the presence of an exacting person, which these women often are. But the special relationships I encounter are God given. It is rather like being a vehicle for the Lord. God uses people to promote God's work.

My first such friendship happened in the late 1970s. I had just started my job at the university library. I was very excited about this and showed it. This often annoyed co-workers who took half a day to wake up. "How could you be so cheerful this early in the morning?" they'd growl.

This was particularly true of a woman named Erin. She was Irish, witty, with a sharp tongue that could flatten you with one word. We were changing the Dewy Decimal System over to the Library of Congress classification. Some of us went up in teams and worked our way through the stacks.

Erin and I were thrown together for months on end. In the silence of the rows, we eventually got to know and even like each other rather well. I often bubbled over about a book I had taken home to look at the night before and how it was changing my thought structure. I would quote something I had read. "If I think joy, be joy, feel joy, I'll be full of joy."

One day Erin disappeared for three days and I was told the truth about her life. She was an alcoholic and was working at the library as part of her rehabilitation program. Knowing this, I lost my fear of her and replaced it with compassion. Of course, we never talked about where she had been.

Erin hid her true feelings by whistling or by swearing, two things she did alternately. When she swore she used the Lord's name profusely. "Sorry Anne," she'd say. She saw the pain in my eyes. "You mustn't be so sensitive."

I had to take a stand. "God is my friend, Erin. Besides, the pain is not so much for me as it is for you and

what you are doing to yourself by your rejection of him."

I thought she had chosen not to hear me until she spoke tersely from behind a pile of books. "I don't believe in that crap anymore."

Then I had the courage to speak. "Oh but you do or you wouldn't use God's name so often. Something is compelling you to say it, but it isn't Christ." I let it go at that.

Later she disappeared again. After days of absence we were a little shy of each other until she asked me, "What book are you reading now?"

I told her "Peale."

"Who?" she asked.

I was then able to tell her that I had read Norman Vincent Peale's *Stay Alive For the Rest of Your Life*. I went off on my usual tangent.

Did she know that to be enthusiastic is to be in God? *En* means "in" and *theo* means "God." She looked at me with what I thought was a withering glance. But this time I was wrong. Instead she said the magic words that started the

change in her life.

"Well, when you're through with that book I wouldn't mind reading it myself. I could do with a bit of enthusiasm in my life."

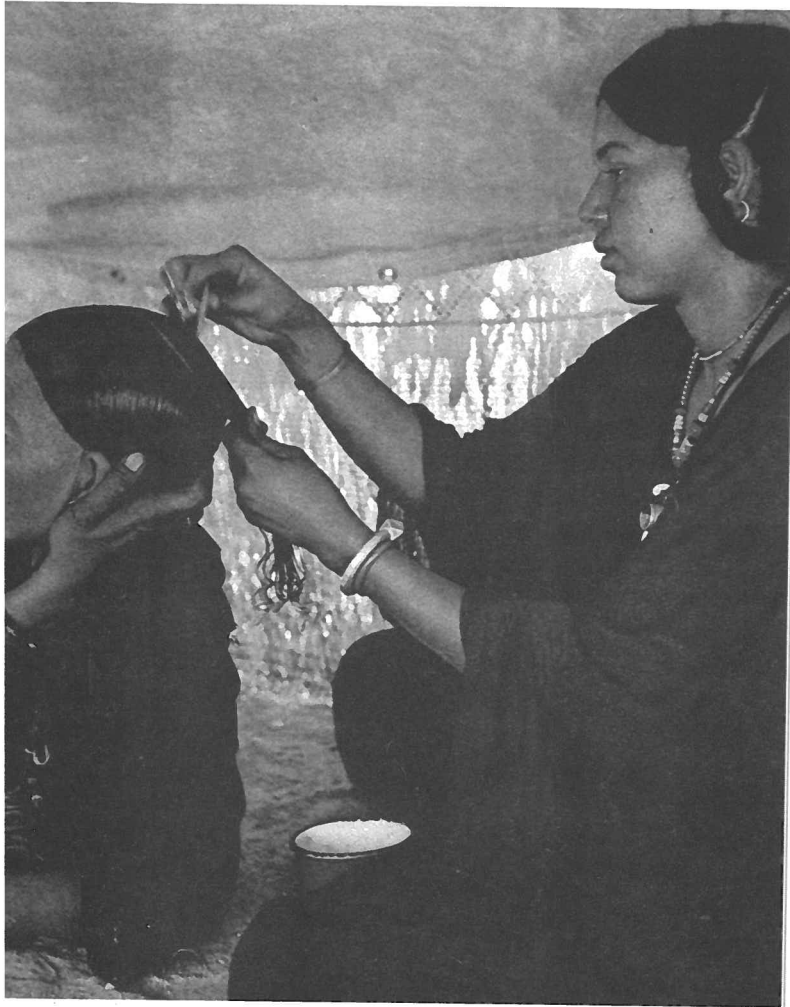
From that day on she began to ply me with questions. I didn't know then where the answers came from but I do know now. It was as though someone else had spoken them. You see, I was inexperienced too. Everyone saw the difference in her life and we became inseparable friends.

One morning when Erin came to work she took me aside and said, "I've set my face to the sun, Anne, because of your little book and your continuous chatter."

Being enthusiastic, I hugged her. Secretly I prayed, "Please God. Make it last."

My mind blurs here. I don't remember if it was that weekend or the next that my supervisor came to me and





## These Women

by Joan Bond

There are women blessed with eccentricity  
who pat birds and hum among strangers

There are women cursed with niceness  
who believe when they converse the how  
is much more important than the what

There are women who speak for other women  
whose words glow with wounds  
who throw around hope like confetti

There are women who do not pray  
their eyes held down by the horizon

There are women who wear their ego  
in a fur coat, who paint their nails and heart pink

There are women who live alone  
abandoned, keeping company with cats  
their faces stare out from windows

There are women who drink apricot tea  
whose tablecloth is full of sun stains  
whose palms smell of roses

There are women with black blood  
whose wombs carry dust

There are women who wrestle angels  
and embroider their initials in the feathers  
who have discovered their name is a dance

said, "Erin won't be in today. You'll have to work alone." Immediately I thought she had failed again. But there was more. "Anne." She had taken a firm grip on my arm. "Erin won't be coming back." Now I was sure she had failed and they had finally let her go. But the voice went on. "Erin died this weekend of a brain tumour. I wanted you to hear it from me."

The whole acquisition department where I worked was silent. The machines suddenly stopped. Everyone expected me to break down. But I could only whisper, "The Lord took her now because she might not have had the strength to keep her promise." Inside me there was a great sadness but also a sense of joy for Erin.

This experience taught me to stand up for Christ no matter what the circumstances. I also learned that God is working in the life of the person placed before you. We have only to obey.

.....  
*Anne Martens lives in Winnipeg, where she and her husband, Victor, are long-standing members of Elmwood MB Church.*

.....  
*Joan Bond is a prairie woman whose work has appeared in literary journals, denominational periodicals, and local newspapers. Her poems have also been aired on CBC Radio.*

# The Rape of Tamar

by Lori Matties

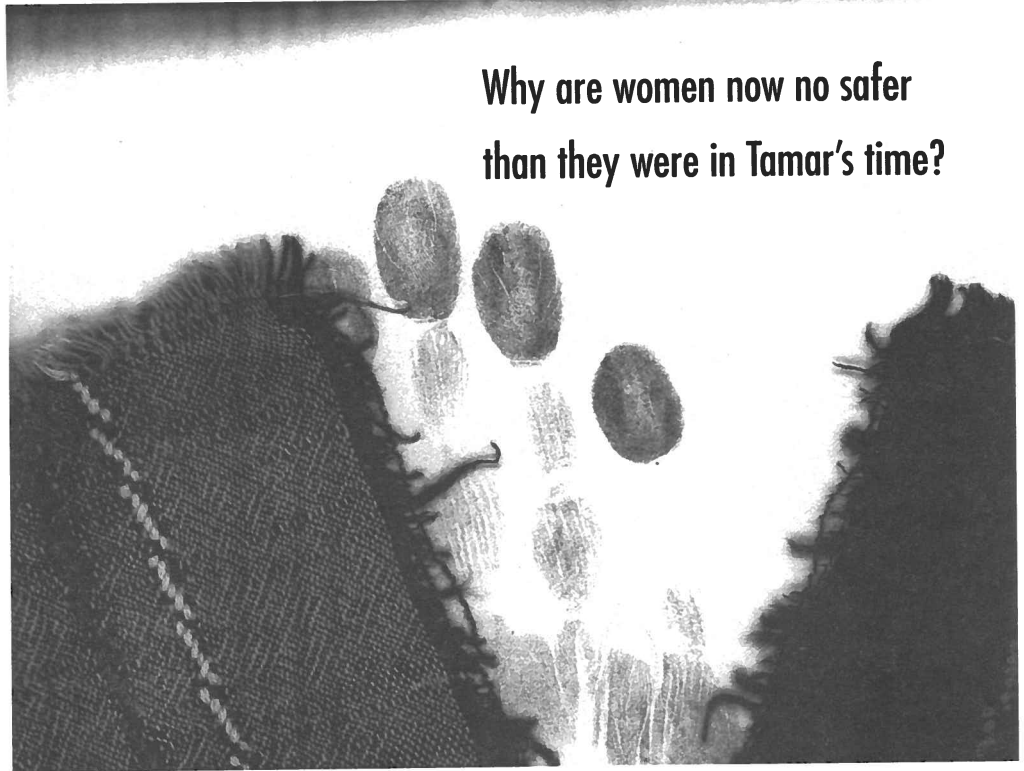
*I chose this story for the first "unspeakable issue" because it is one of both silencing and telling. Absalom tells his sister not to talk about the horrible thing that has happened to her, but the writer records it for all generations. Thus, the unspeakable becomes public. We, the readers, give Tamar's voice of grief back to her and are at the same time challenged to face her story and stories like it that continue to plague us in our time. How can we speak God's word of grace into the brokenness we human beings continue to perpetrate?*

**T**amar's rape is one of a series of sad stories about the relationship of King David to his children. David, the handsome youth who braves the Philistine giant, who writes beautiful and haunting poetry, who loves God with a deep loyalty, is also the lustful man who steals another man's wife, arranges for his murder and alienates his children through misguided loyalty and grief (See 2 Samuel 11-19:8).

Tamar is David's daughter, though the story never calls her that. She is identified only as the beautiful sister of "David's son Absalom" (2 Sam 13:1). Tamar's other brother, David's oldest son, Amnon, lusts after her so much that he makes himself ill. He and his cousin Jonadab devise a scheme. Amnon, gaining David's audience by pretending to be sick, requests that Tamar be brought to his room to cook food and serve it to him. David grants the request and sends Tamar to Amnon who watches her prepare the food and then rapes her.

Tamar tries to prevent the rape by appealing to reason. The king will grant a marriage between them if Amnon requests it, she says. If Amnon rapes her she will have nowhere to hide her shame, and Amnon will become an outcast in the eyes of all Israel. But Amnon ignores her. Afterward, his lust reverts to hatred, and he orders her

**Why are women now no safer than they were in Tamar's time?**



away. Tamar again objects, saying that his rejection of her is worse than the rape. But Amnon cares nothing for what he has spoiled, and Tamar goes off to make a public statement of grief by tearing her virgin's clothing and putting ashes on her head. In the society of her time, a woman who was raped was considered unmarriageable and consigned to a life of ostracism and shame.

Tamar takes refuge in Absalom's home. Absalom tries to comfort her by telling her not to take the rape to heart; not to speak of it. The silence deepens. David refuses to punish Amnon, "because he loved him, for he was his firstborn" (2 Sam 13:21). Absalom says nothing but plots the murder of Amnon. Tamar disappears from the story here, and we hear no more of her. In an ironic postscript, however, the author tells us Absalom had four children but doesn't give us the names of his three sons – only of his daughter, another Tamar, who "was a beautiful woman" (2 Sam 14:27). Perhaps in this small way, the son corrects the father's shameful neglect of his daughter.

The text contains no word of David's feelings for Tamar. Were daughters of no value beyond being eligible

for trade as wives? Then at least he should have sought recompense from Amnon for what he had destroyed. David's abdication of his fatherly role in refusing to deal with the situation results in Amnon's death, the alienation and eventual death of Absalom and civil war that divides the country. Perhaps, in tacitly siding with Amnon by refusing to punish him, David reveals that he has not yet learned the lesson his own adultery with Bathsheba should have taught him. The web of sin, which ensnares an innocent young woman, entangles the whole family. The words "brother" and "sister," used so liberally in this story, make a mockery of the safety a family is supposed to afford.

Wisdom, too, is mocked. Tamar is the only one who speaks wise words, but to no avail. Rather than saying to wisdom, "You are my sister," (and thus held safe and in high esteem – see Proverbs 7:4), Amnon calls Tamar sister but ignores her wise words and brutally violates her, treating her instead like a whore.<sup>1</sup> Is there then no safe place for wisdom, nor for Tamar, her human representative?

For many, this story is all too familiar. Statistics Canada cites 23,872 reported cases of sexual assault in 1999. That is probably a fraction (10%) of the total number. Current statistics estimate that half of all Canadian women have survived at least one incident of sexual or physical violence. The majority of sexual assaults are committed by men known to the victim, often by men who are in a position of trust, such as a relative, doctor, coach, religious advisor, teacher, friend, employer or date. Unfortunately, the reality for religious communities is no different from that of their secular counterparts.

The statistics go on and on, each one adding to my sense of rage and helplessness as a woman. I fear for my daughter. I am outraged as I listen to the stories of friends who were sexually abused as girls by men who were leaders in their churches. Why are women now no safer than they were in Tamar's time? Why are the very ones we trust also the ones most likely to harm us?

Of course, there are many reasons why sexual abuse happens. Most often it is learned from experience. Children who witness or are subject to sexual abuse grow up to repeat it. A society that elevates sexual experience and depreciates traditional boundaries must expect experimentation with and abuse of sexual power. Those who are abused often believe that they deserve what they get, and even that such treatment is normal and desirable.

I believe we are still telling women to "be quiet" about the abuse they suffer. We still think that if we don't notice it, it will go away. We are afraid, and so we try to distance ourselves by finding reasons why women cause their own abuse. Like King David, we don't call the

perpetrators to justice, neither in our justice systems nor in the church. How can healing begin if we refuse to name the illness?

It is only as we speak the unspeakable that we begin to reverse its evil cycle. God has shown us a different way. That way is recognizing the precious image of God in each of us, regardless of gender or class, and it is calling each other out of sin. Succumbing to the urge to overpower another is sin. Refusing to hear and value wisdom as our intimate and honourable "sister" is sin. Silencing our grief over injustice is also sin.

At the very least, if half of the women in our

churches have experienced some form of sexual or physical abuse, we need to stop being silent about it. The biblical writer gave Tamar a voice for her grief through telling her story. I have never heard a sermon or sat in a Sunday school class that dealt with this story.

By our silence, are we consigning the victims of rape in our congregations to the same invisibility and shame Tamar suffered? Can we not, as agents of God's grace, provide a safe place for them to tell their stories and work toward healing?

As God gave courage to the writer of 2 Samuel to speak the unspeakable, so may we also be granted grace and courage to speak it in our day.

.....  
Lori Matties, editor of *Sophia*, lives in Winnipeg with her husband and two school-aged children. She has a Master's degree in Christian Studies and continues to explore ways of using her gifts in the contexts of her faith and Canadian society. In addition to *Sophia*, she volunteers with Ten Thousand Villages and Habitat for Humanity.

1 Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1984. p 56.

### Opening the Dialogue:

What is your experience with this passage of scripture in your church? Has it ever been discussed?

What "unspeakable issue" would you like to see addressed in this column?

Send your thoughts and ideas by e-mail or to our *new* address: *Sophia*, P.O. Box 28062, RPO North Kildonan, Winnipeg, MB R2G 4E9.

*We are still telling women  
to "be quiet" about the abuse  
they suffer.*

*As* a child, after I was tucked into bed and had said my prayers, the lights were shut out, and in the darkness I was sure there were hideous monsters ready to devour me. I would lie very still, feeling my heart beating louder and louder, in terror of sudden attack. I would call out, quietly at first so as not to disturb the ravenous beasts, and then more insistently. The lights would go back on and the shadows disappear. My heart would stop pounding and I would rest in the security of knowing I was safe and sound in my own home.

No monsters could devour me that night.

Fear of the darkness is not limited to our childhood imaginations. As we move through adulthood the shadows take on different shapes, and our fears often grow out of life's changes and losses. In my work as a nurse in palliative care, I have had the privilege of journeying with many who are living with a terminal illness and, more recently, with those who grieve the loss of their loved one. Without exception, these have been my greatest teachers as we have walked through the shadows of intense fear, sorrow, anguish, anger and restlessness.

One of my strongest memories is of a young woman who, at my age, was facing terminal cancer. I vividly recall sitting outside her home on the first day we met, facing my own feelings of inadequacy – what could I possibly say to her that would bring peace? My darkness came as fear that I had nothing to offer, nothing to say in the face of such suffering and loss. But it came to me that God doesn't ask me to be strong; I will be given strength in my weakness. I still felt fear but a light went on. I knew God loved her and would be with us. In the

weeks that followed, Terry\* and I spent many hours talking while I massaged her immobilized legs. Terry struggled with the darkness many people feel as they try to make sense of what has happened to them. "Why would God allow this to happen?" "I will be healed if I have enough faith." "Did I do something wrong and is God trying to teach me something?" "I have so much to do." "I'm afraid."

We spoke of the story of the man born blind: who

sinned? And Jesus' answer: no one sinned. Another light went on. We spoke of God's promise to bring complete healing, though not always in a physical way and not always in this world. We spoke of hopes that God would make Terry the strongest runner in Heaven, that she would leap with strength and joy.

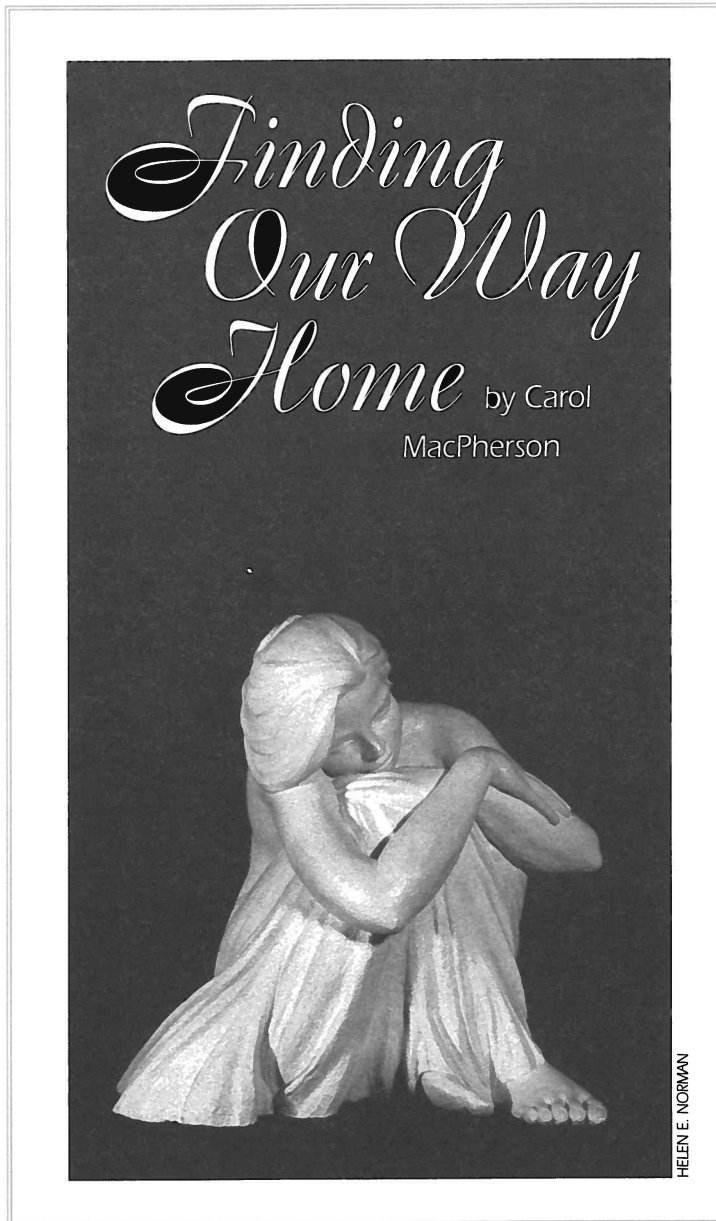
On the last day we shared, Terry was very weak. She was bathed and dressed in her finest night-clothes ready for her church to bring communion. We hugged, and as we held each other, she whispered, "Have a good life." I whispered back, "You, too." With clear eyes she smiled and replied, "I will." We were quiet, understanding what we had both just said. Terry died peacefully that evening. And I wept with the knowledge that something profound had happened and that I would carry her story with me always.

In the past few years, my work in community health has led me to work in bereavement support.

It has been no less a

privilege to walk through this most difficult of journeys with those who face their deepest fears and pain. Jesus in Gethsemane asked the disciples to "Watch with me," (see Mt 26:36) and I count it an honour to watch with and care for those who grieve, to bear witness so that they do not

\*not her real name.



HELENE NORMAN



journey alone. This work has evolved into group support and public presentations on grieving during the holiday season and again in spring.

One woman I have been privileged to know is an artist by profession. Gail had experienced an exceptional burden of grief through a traumatic accident in which she lost her sight in one eye and then lost her father, whom she loved very much, the next day. Using Sue Monk Kidd's book *When the Heart Waits* as a springboard for discussion, we talked about the beauty of the butterfly as it emerges and the hard work of transformation within the darkness of the cocoon. We spoke of the importance of not disturbing the cocoon before its time, or the butterfly might not live or ever fly. We spoke of God's faithful presence in the cocoon, and Gail experienced the gradual warmth of light and new inner vision as she honoured grief's presence in her life. Over time, Gail was once again able to find artistic expression and resume teaching. In the spring, she shared her story with a large audience of people who were grieving. Displayed behind her as she shared her hopeful message were banners of butterflies in flight that she had created. It was a powerful story, gentle and loving, that spoke of hope and light in the darkness.

In the past three years at Church of the Way, we have held a special service during Advent. We seek to welcome those who have experienced loss and who find the holiday a difficult time, to come and find rest and hope in the love of Jesus. This is the Lord's work, and we believe that God will "bind up the brokenhearted ... and comfort all who mourn" (Is.61:1) It is a privilege to plan this evening and lift it up to the Lord, knowing that Jesus walks with us wherever we go.

What I've learned from the remarkable people I've known is that just as we can see the stars shine in the dark of night, so it is often true that we sense the profoundness of God's presence as we journey through the dark valleys of our lives. It is as if the sunrise dissipates the shadows as we start to know the freedom that God's love brings. The darkness may still exist but we are no longer bound by it. With fear removed we see a new reality and know a new peace in our hearts. The awesome reality is that, although the dark times will come, we are never alone. God, who lovingly made us, knows our fears and our weakness and is always present to us. God's continual message for us today, as we walk in uncertain and dark places, is "do not fear" and "I am with you." We are safe in the Lord's keeping – we are home.

.....  
*Carol Macpherson is a community health nurse who works in the field of health promotion and particularly with people who have experienced change and loss. She loves music and the outdoors, is married and especially enjoys spending time with family and friends.*

## Shelf Life

*Continued from page 23*

church, yet all had to accept the decisions about what is right or wrong, how life is to be lived and what the role of women in the church is to be.

Chittister supports her arguments very effectively through her personal stories at the beginning of each chapter. In one, she relates how as a girl she wanted to serve at mass and came to the meeting where they were going to interview the altar boys. She was told, "Joan, girls cannot be altar boys" (19). Many women can identify with the feelings of hurt, rejection and disillusionment such a message brings.

Chittister shows us the way to a spirituality that puts another face on God by putting another face on people. As an educator, I am learning to view every student as an expression of the mind of God, worthy of respect and valuable for who she or he is. It seems to me that Mother Teresa practised this kind of spirituality when she stated that whenever she looked at a sick and dying person, she knew she was meeting Jesus face to face. This is what it means to have a heart of flesh and not a heart of stone (see Ezekiel 36:26).

# Fear Not

by Brian Unruh

*We* are approaching the season when "good cheer" is spoken of, sung about, acknowledged by people of many faiths, and partaken of in a variety of ways (literally and figuratively).

All of us who worship the Saviour of this season need to understand that God is in the process of performing miracles in each of our daily lives. It is this very truth that enables us to claim courage over fear for each moment we face. "With fear and trembling" were the words I used in agreeing to write this article, not knowing that the theme for this issue of was exactly that. "Take courage" or "fear not" should have been my response!

The Christmas season is rarely referred to as the season of fear, yet many of the contributing cast that first Christmas (Mary, Joseph, Elizabeth, the shepherds in the field) were confronted by, "Don't be afraid!" Why? Because when life's miracles confront us, as human beings we tend to respond with fear rather than courage. Fear of the present. Fear of the unknown about to happen. Fear of the responses of others who would perhaps judge or not comprehend, or choose to hate. It is only later, when the significance of God's involvements in our lives is properly comprehended, that we are aware of the miraculous that is occurring! So it was when God became Human, and God's servants heard, "Don't be afraid!" Only years later did Mary, Joseph, the shepherds and others fully understand that the humanly fearful events about to occur were in reality God's miracles of grace and salvation.

Courage is the only antidote to fear: but our courage must be

grounded in God's miracles that are unfolding. The angels exclaimed, "Do not be afraid, for I bring news of great joy!" What about your life and mine? Is God perhaps performing miracles in our lives at the very time when we are humanly most fearful, most prone to questioning God's wisdom because of our circumstances? I cannot comment on your life or your circumstances, but let me share a brief personal testimony about fear and courage.

My life (because of godly parents and faithful mentors) from adulthood on has been one enriched with involvement in what is commonly called "full

*As I began a daily commitment to trusting the One who loves me I began to face my fears with God's courage.*

time Christian service." From 1974 to 1993, directing Bible camps and pastoring were my passion and my privilege. But in early 1993, the health I had always taken for granted suddenly departed and shortly thereafter I was diagnosed with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. I have been "on the shelf" ever since.

Fear for the next day, then the next week (and on into the future), became a constant companion. Along with that fear came a host of unanswerable questions, then some discontent and finally a lot of anger over the events that were causing me to "miss out on my real life." I forgot that my God was a God of miracles and the One who knew the end from the beginning. In the very midst of these emotions and responses on my part,

came God's challenge to me: "Do not be afraid!" It took me a while to hear God's voice. It took me longer to admit that God was still in control and still performing miracles (whether I noticed them or not).

I cannot tell you precisely when I submitted to God's intentions for me, but as I began a daily commitment to trusting the One who loves me (only one day at a time), I began to face my fears with God's courage. I have continually been awestruck by the opportunities that have graciously been allowed me in serving God.

No, I am not healed (physically), but I have been set free from the fear that marked those early days. I have begun (feebly) trusting for each day's grace to live for God, and also believing that miracles are occurring in and through me to God's glory. I am learning to allow God to perform miracles within my circumstances!

I am confident that I can say with the angels, "Behold, I bring you great joy! For unto us a Son is born, unto us a Saviour is given." With the Saviour's joy in my heart, comes evidence of his saving grace in this present life of mine. My prayer is that each one of you would also set aside your fear (whatever your lot), take courage and believe that God is still in the business of performing miracles! "Do not be afraid!"

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*Brian Unruh was born to missionary parents in Northern Canada. He spent his adult years as a camp director and an associate pastor until 1993. He and his wife and family have been members of Cornerstone Bible Church of Steinbach for the last twelve years.*

## Swing Low

.....  
by Miriam Toews.

(Toronto and New York: Stoddart Publishing, 2000), 191 pages.

Reviewed by Agnes Dyck.

*Swing Low* is a daughter's loving tribute to her father who was "distant, silent and sad much of the time (140)." At age seventeen Mel Toews had been diagnosed as manic-depressive and had been told that he would never live a normal life. Miriam Toews has created a voice for her father in which we hear his baffled reflections on people and relationships. The narrative weaves back and forth in time during his hospitalization after his retirement from teaching.

In developing her father's narrative, Toews interweaves a total environment for him: his relationships with his family members, his long teaching career, his impeccable attendance at church and his public persona in a glass house atmosphere. In the process we are treated to small-town memories and delicious gossip.

The reader views a wife and mother whose loving courage shines throughout the narration. Elvira Toews, faithful to her marriage commitment, must have experienced ongoing adjustments to her husband's strange ways. Her winsome capacity for joy, her determination to further her education, her numerous interests including music, baseball and traveling were surely ways of coping with difficulties. The narrator claims: "Elvira had long ago and for her own self-preservation, learned to laugh at my foibles, rather than become exasperated, and I was grateful for it (147)."

*Swing Low* is a heart warmer, a page turner, mesmerizing because of

the content, but also because of the exquisite writing. Miriam Toews credits her father for her considerable writing skills. With love she recalls brief moments of emotional connection with her father. Her compassionate viewpoint implies forgiveness with a sense of humor, of balance. Much of the biography must, of necessity, be speculative, with the daughter's evaluation surfacing in her father's voice. *Swing Low* is an imaginative journey into Mel Toews's long struggle with mental illness, written in order to satisfy a daughter's need to understand.

## Heart of Flesh: A Feminist Spirituality for Women and Men

.....  
by Joan D. Chittister.

(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans and Ottawa: Novalis, 1998), 187 pages

Reviewed by Mary Friesen.

In *Heart of Flesh* the author proposes a feminist spirituality that is modeled after the radical example of Jesus, whose human vulnerability and compassion gave him strength to love the poor and the outcasts and to resist evil without violence. Analyzing the history of patriarchal thinking, she shows how its tendency toward violence and dualistic theology diminishes both women and men. Much of Christian theology has been based on wisdom of men, not women, of certain ethnic groups and not others, by one economic class while ignoring the experiences of people in developing nations. Chittister believes that a spirituality that listens to the spiritual wisdom of some, but not of all, is no spirituality at all.

The reader will certainly ask, "What is feminist spirituality and

what does it mean to both women and men?" Chittister answers by analyzing the values generated by a patriarchal social system and comparing them to values articulated in feminist theology and worldview. She offers a spirituality that fosters the values of compassion over competition, humility over pride, dialogue over authoritarianism, vulnerability over strength, and nonviolence over aggression. This holistic spirituality is enhanced by the inclusion of art images by Nancy Earle.

If spirituality is the response that "wells up in the human heart in the face of eternal truth" (152), then it would seem that the spirituality proposed by Sister Joan has great significance for the practice of ministry. A spirituality as described here is needed in our world of competition, racism, war and poverty. We must learn to be deeply involved in the world just as Jesus was engaged with the poor and outcasts of his time. Jesus offered healing and wholeness to all, including children, women and social outcasts, by talking to them and challenging the system that would oppress some and favour others.

The author asserts that something is missing from spirituality as we have known it because something is missing from life as we have designed it. In particular, historically women have been left out of public policy making and from the theological development of western thought and this has limited the vision of the church. Personally, I can easily identify with her statement that "growing up as a woman in a man's world, I had seen the effects of dualism in the life of women and men ...." (xi). Traditionally, women's voices were left out of decision-making processes in the

Continued on page 21 ►



*God* IS OUR REFUGE AND STRENGTH,  
A VERY PRESENT HELP IN TROUBLE.

THEREFORE WE WILL NOT FEAR,  
THOUGH THE EARTH SHOULD CHANGE,  
THOUGH THE MOUNTAINS SHAKE  
IN THE HEART OF THE SEA;  
THOUGH ITS WATERS ROAR AND FOAM,  
THOUGH THE MOUNTAINS  
TREMBLE WITH ITS TUMULT.

PSALM 46:1-3 NRSV