

ON THE SURVIVAL OF MENNONITE COMMUNITY

IN MODERN-DAY AMERICA

Lessons from History, Communities, and Artists

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Committee chair: David Graybeal, PhD,
Drew University Professor Emeritus of Church and Society
Advisor: C. Norman Kraus, PhD,
Goshen College Professor Emeritus of Bible Studies

Bonnie Price Lofton

Drew University

Madison, New Jersey

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ABSTRACT

Many of the beliefs and practices that have traditionally characterized Mennonites—a Christian sect that hews to pacifism, simple living, and egalitarian lay-centered communities—run counter to those that underpin America’s prevailing socio-economic system. Since the sixteenth century Mennonites have taken one of two paths when at variance with the society in which they are embedded: (1) they have retreated into their own insular, rural communities and thus retained their distinctive beliefs and practices, or (2) they have engaged with the dominant society, ultimately losing their distinctive characteristics and becoming assimilated. In the United States today, Mennonites who have left their farm roots since World War II and sought higher education are taking the second path, with signs of assimilation already evident. A survey of 58 artists of Mennonite origin conducted for this dissertation found that many felt circumscribed by their communities. About half of them expressed positive feelings about leaving the Mennonite church and losing some of their Mennonite distinctiveness. Yet a strong majority of the survey respondents also acknowledged debt to their forbears in giving them a valuable alternative lens for viewing and living in the larger world. Ironically, many non-Mennonite sociologists are calling for all Americans to embrace the community-rooted, spiritually oriented values that a large number of modern Mennonites are relinquishing. This dissertation posits that few people can consistently uphold alternatives to the dominant socio-economic paradigm without being part of a community that seeks to embody that vision. It concludes by suggesting that the world needs the alternative value system embodied in the Mennonite church-community tradition. This tradition will disappear, however, as a positive countervailing force in the modern world unless Mennonites choose to forgo some of the individualism of mainstream society and voluntarily commit themselves to church-communities that hew to agreed-upon biblical values, handle conflicts healthily, and accept the wide range of members’ views and expressive gifts.

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PREFACE

I stumbled into the Mennonite church-community when looking for a graduate program on peace studies following the attacks of 9/11. I was already oriented toward pacifistic theology—I had become a member of a meeting of the Society of Friends (Quakers) in the late 1990s, the only “faith community” that I have ever actually belonged to. But the meeting I joined, which owned a meetinghouse dating to the 1700s, was mainly conducted in silence, in the unprogrammed manner of traditional Quaker meetings, and was disappointingly moribund in terms of its outreach and social action. The membership was small and dwindling. Kindly, elderly, born-into-Quaker families initially occupied the leadership, with a dozen or so “convinced Friends” (like me) looking to them for guidance. After a year or so, I found myself wondering what had happened to the activist Quakers of the abolitionist or prison reform movement. It seemed that being a Quaker, at least in my meeting, mainly meant sitting in silence once a week, with occasional verbal interventions assumedly inspired by God. The handful of children in the meeting, including my two (then elementary age), had little to engage their energies.

An Internet search for “peace studies” led me to the master’s degree program in conflict transformation at Eastern Mennonite University (EMU). After enrolling, I loved what I was learning in class, but I also appreciated the more subtle distinctives I found at EMU: similar to the Quakers, Mennonites¹ did not put much stock in hierarchies—professors were called by their first names and were remarkably humble, seeming as eager to learn from their students as vice versa. Most of the Mennonites I met lived simply, even frugally. They saw no distinction between believing something—such as helping the poor and relieving suffering—and actually doing it. That is, to use a cliché, they “put their money (and time) where their mouths were,” which struck me as different from most of the modern-day Quakers I knew. They didn’t just talk about the teachings of the Prince of Peace, they actively and creatively worked at peace, learning as they

¹ I will be using the terms “Mennonite” and “Anabaptist” somewhat interchangeably in this paper, though actually Mennonites are a subset of a broader group dubbed Anabaptists (for reasons that will be explained in Chapter 1). The interchangeability of this term is akin to alternating between the term “Americans” (meaning U.S. citizens) and “North Americans,” though the former is a subset of the latter.

went and refining what they did, in order to be effective as peace builders. In short, academics was always combined with practice, which meant that EMU was as far from being “ivory tower” as any college I had seen (and I had worked at or attended four others: University of Virginia, Duke University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and McGill University).

In the final lap of earning my master’s degree in 2003, I applied to be the first full-time fundraiser for the conflict transformation program. I made it through a rigorous interview process where 21 people (I counted) asked me questions that one would normally expect—such as what made me believe I was capable of asking folks for money, when my main work experiences had been in journalism—plus questions especially pertinent to EMU, such as my views on Jesus and homosexuality. In hindsight, I am more religiously liberal than the answers I gave at the time. Lacking Mennonite heritage or membership—an obvious disadvantage for working at a Mennonite institution—I tried to fit the mold of devout pacifist Christian, albeit Quaker-style. In the back of my mind, I also think I envisioned myself evolving into being a Mennonite-style Christian, given how much I liked what I saw in their day-to-day lives.

I began as a fundraiser in 2003 and moved in 2006 into my present role of editing two periodicals for EMU: *Crossroads*, the tri-annual alumni magazine, and *Peacebuilder*, the bi-annual magazine of EMU’s Center for Justice and Peacebuilding. In both my fundraising and editorial roles, I have visited a wide variety of Mennonite churches and found that all of them are more biblically based—ranging from literal to contextual, but still referential to the Old and New Testaments in each and every worship session—than the Quaker meetings I attended as a member or visitor in the past. And it goes without saying that to be a Mennonite you need to be baptized when you are old enough to know what you are committing yourself to. As thoroughly documented in *Martyrs’ Mirror*, published in 1660, thousands of the original Anabaptists in Europe were gruesomely killed for refusing to endorse infant baptism and for advocating “believer’s baptism.”

I am, however, the only one in my family of origin who is *not* baptized. Like Mennonites, my Baptist parents believed that baptism should await the age when a young person can make a mature decision—usually, for Baptists, somewhere around middle or high school. But I wasn’t raised in a traditional Baptist church—my father, a school

principal, was forced to leave his North Carolina high school in the 1950s when he openly supported the U.S. Supreme Court's decision on school de-segregation. He and my mother, an English teacher, sought integrated schools and found them within the U.S. military school system overseas. As a veteran of World War II who served in North Africa and Italy, my father was pleased to land a civilian job as a high school principal on a Navy base in Morocco. My formative years—aged five to twelve—were spent in Morocco and Turkey, plus roaming around Europe and the Middle East with the family when school was out. We attended interdenominational Protestant church services wherever we were, but we certainly didn't belong to a recognizable "church community." Moreover, my parents reached across religious lines—they helped educate two Muslim teenagers who had been living in an orphanage, without trying to convert them to Christianity. They became close friends with a Baha'i family. We had all kinds of people, especially Muslims, in and out of our home—sometimes living with us— and it was clear to me that there were good people of all religious stripes. Nevertheless, my sister, five years older than me, did choose to be baptized by a generic Protestant chaplain employed by the military when she was in junior high school, and my brother, 16 months younger, soon followed suit.

By the time I was in junior high school, we had returned to the United States and I was what I now know to be a "third culture kid." I felt different from my peers at a large suburban school, few of whom had traveled outside of the United States. I did not feel comfortable in the Baptist church that my parents tried to take me to—for them, they were returning to familiar hymns and rituals; for me, it was simply parochial and suffocating. Told that we had to go to church "somewhere," my older brother and I took ourselves to the local Unitarian Church—which seemed more like a social club or a weekly class on world religions than a church, but it suited us better than the Baptist church. So, I missed being old enough to be baptized by a military chaplain, I rejected my parents' Baptist church, and the Unitarians don't do baptism. (Nor do Quakers, being averse to rituals—as am I.) I supported, however, the sincere and well-thought-out decision of my daughter at age 18 to be baptized into a Mennonite church.

I am married to a Southern-bred lawyer who is a military veteran and the son of politically liberal schoolteachers. Raised in small-town Georgia, his parents saw that he

swam in a fundamentalist rivulet of Protestantism, the Church of Christ. He left this in his college years. Over our 25-year union, we have shared raising a daughter from his first marriage, who is now a 32-year-old nurse in California, and two children that I gave birth to, a 23-year-old son who just graduated from William & Mary, and a 20-year-old daughter, who is a sophomore at Appalachian State University.

I offer this condensed version of my life journey to explain the lens through which I have viewed my dissertation topic. I hope it will be obvious that I care about the continued existence and viability of the modern Mennonite community that underpins the university where I work. Without it and without the unique combination of religious theory and practice embodied by the Mennonites—resulting in an amazing impact on the world, despite their small numbers—the EMU community would have no reason to exist: it would be just another underfunded, struggling, non-descript liberal arts college. What may not be obvious, however, is that I recognize that I will always be on the fringe of this community—cheering it on, advocating for it, rallying people to it—but not truly within it because, quite simply, I fit the disparaging description of pseudo-Christians put forward by renowned Mennonite theologian Harold S. Bender in 1950: “There are those who think of Christ primarily as a prophet or moral teacher, one who brings intellectual truth out of which to build a system of thought, theological or ethical, with answers to the meaning of life or existence” (*Anabaptist Theology* 39). Bender went on to explain that Christ is much more than this—he should be worshipped in adoration as the son of God and recognized as Savior, “the sin-bearer who atoned for our sins by death on the cross” (39). I am troubled by the concept of a sacrificial lamb of any kind—much less one’s own child... well, I could go on about my divergences from Christian orthodoxy, but the point is: I would have to make a huge leap of faith to become a Mennonite, and I can’t do it.

Nevertheless, I have come to recognize that much is missing in my life and in the lives of millions of my fellow Americans who aren’t embedded in a community of any kind. After watching a number of young adults struggle with finding a path in college and afterwards in the absence of any clear moral moorings, beyond “don’t do anything against the law,” I was determined that my two biological children would have the benefit of as much moral and theological clarity as I could provide them, even if they opted to push against it later. When I came to work at EMU—which involved my family

moving 60 miles south to Harrisonburg—both children got enrolled in a Mennonite school. Both completed their secondary education under Mennonite auspices. I had hoped they would choose to attend EMU, or at least its closest sister Mennonite institution, Goshen College in Indiana. Though they opted for public universities, they remain regular church-goers and show clear grounding in Mennonite thought and practices. So far in their life choices, they embody the “servant-leader” model propounded at EMU. Obviously my husband and I worked at being good parents, and all four grandparents offered unqualified love. But I also credit the larger Mennonite community for helping us to provide well-banked streambeds for channeling our teens into healthy outlets and choices.

But I am different from my children. More nomadic psychologically. I researched this dissertation as a caring observer rather than as an insider in the Mennonite community. I am the rootless American so typical in modern-day society.

* * * *

As a model of the sympathetic-outsider bias I bring to this dissertation, let me offer linguistic anthropologist K. David Harrison of Swarthmore College. Harrison has applied himself since 1998 to understanding and documenting the endangered languages of small minority groups around the world. He hasn’t joined any of these groups, but he has certainly advocated for them through publications and a documentary film with support from the National Geographic Society. “Some have described my work as being a ‘reverse missionary,’” writes Harrison, who was born to Christian missionaries working among the Cree in Canada. “I visit indigenous cultures not to bring them an alien ideology, to convert, or to advocate that they abandon their beliefs and adopt others. Rather, I go to celebrate, promote, and soak up their knowledge and beliefs” (24). He also goes to sound the alarm that these minority cultures are in danger of disappearing, thus robbing humankind of many centuries of their rich, wise heritages, with their alternative ways of interacting with, and viewing, the world.

Similarly, in both my job as editor-in-chief at Eastern Mennonite University and in producing this dissertation, I feel I am celebrating the particular Mennonite church-community in which I have landed, *and* I am bemoaning its threatened disappearance through assimilation.

INTRODUCTION

When I embarked on this dissertation two years ago, I intended to focus on the way artists raised under the umbrella of the Mennonite Church USA apparently abandon their original faith in large numbers. Instead this topic proved to be a catalyst for me to explore the larger issue of whether modern-living American-Mennonites will be able to retain the community basis of their religion—or whether, on the contrary, they will become indistinguishable in another few generations from the larger society in which they live. If Mennonite artists are leaving their church-based communities at the rate of one in two—as I found in my survey of 58 artists—perhaps they are simply the proverbial “canaries in the mine,” warning of the imminent demise of their people as a distinctive group.

I had noticed the exodus of Mennonite artists as the writer/editor of the alumni magazine at Eastern Mennonite University. In the summer of 2009, I produced an issue on alumni in the visual and performing arts. In the summer of 2010 I did an issue on the literary arts. Finally, in the fall-winter of 2010-11 I covered the musical arts. For each issue, I contacted about 100 alumni—or 300 total—to glean information and insights about their work. By the time I put the third issue to bed, I realized that many of these artist-alumni were no longer connected to the Mennonite church, even if (maybe especially if) they had been raised in the family of a Mennonite pastor or by Mennonite missionaries.

To understand more about who stayed and who left, I sent out queries to 100 artists who appeared to have spent their formative years (roughly through their teens) within a family, church or educational institution associated with what is now called the Mennonite Church USA. I found most of these people by culling them from an online social group to which I belong, the Mennonite Artist Project, but I also approached artists who were alumni of EMU. All were promised anonymity, unless they gave me express permission to quote them in an identifiable way.²

² All unnamed artists quoted herein come from emailed or voice responses to this survey, collected by me from January 21 to March 11, 2011. Since the respondents were promised anonymity, they are not listed in “Works Cited.”

I had no illusions that my survey (reprinted in Appendix B) was a rigorous sociological study. For that, I would have needed to ensure that my numbers were high enough for statistical significance, that my subjects were truly random, and that I had a control group for comparison purposes. For instance, I would have needed to compare the 52 percent exit rate of surveyed artists from the Mennonite community to the exit rate among the general population of Mennonites in the same time period. Rather than aiming for statistical rigor, my survey was designed to explore whether there might be a basis for my impression of a high loss of artists by the Mennonite church and, if so, what possible ramifications that loss might have for both the church-community and the artist.

Upon reviewing about 30,000 words collected from my 58 respondents, I realized I needed to clarify the terms I was using. What does it mean to be “creative”? If an artist feels moved to paint yet another rendition of mother Mary with baby Jesus, does that represent creative freedom or hackneyed conformity, as compared to an artist who produces a totally abstract painting that has no recognizable message? What about “community”? Is it formed on geographical, ethnic, philosophical, intentional, or other grounds? Must it have boundaries of some kind to exist, meaning that some people are necessarily included and others must be left out?

First and foremost, though, I needed to be clear on this question: What is a Mennonite? Part I of this dissertation focuses on answering this question, since it is foundational to all that follows. I look carefully at the Dutch Anabaptists, who initially subscribed to the thoughts of Menno Simons (making them “Mennonites”) in the sixteenth century and who had largely relinquished that identity due to assimilation by the eighteenth century.

In Part II, I seek to define “community,” linking the general to the particular of the Mennonite church-community over the centuries.

In Part III, I start by exploring the role of art in different historical epochs and cultures, then move to presenting the divergent views of artists concerning their Mennonite roots. I note some distinctive characteristics detected among almost all of the Mennonite artists surveyed.

In Part IV, I consider the inevitable tension between expressing individual freedom and conforming to community norms. I also explore twentieth century research

into humans' need for "attachment" and into the vulnerability of minority groups amid a dominant culture. I link these psycho-social factors to the survival of Mennonites in the modern world.

In my concluding chapter, I offer seven "lessons," which I hope will help the Mennonite church to become more open to non-conformists within its own ranks, while not losing its basis of cohesion. I also hope my research will help those inclined toward non-conformity—whether artists or not—to recognize that if all persons "do their own thing" in disregard to everyone else, a community by definition cannot exist and nobody will have the benefit of communal roots in the future. Few of us can live as islands. By default, solo individuals will be subject to the overwhelming influences of the prevailing social-economic paradigm in which they find themselves. In other words, I don't believe that in giving up one's Mennonite community, one is entering a state of utter freedom. Instead one is trading the pressures of a familiar community for a different set of pressures offered by the wider society.

PART I. THE MENNONITES

Chapter 1 The Early Mennonites

Anabaptism is an example of the renewed concern in the church for taking seriously the Sermon on the Mount in everyday living. Monasticism was an earlier example of the same concern. Like the original monastic movement, Anabaptism was a lay movement. Both were committed to nonviolence; both were critical of private property; both made a great deal of obedience; both had the concern for the independence of the church from secular control. Among one group of Anabaptists, the Hutterian brothers, there was even the communal lifestyle.—Walter Klaassen in *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant* (72)

Mennonites are just one of a multitude of branches in a family tree that was labeled “Anabaptist” in sixteenth-century Europe. Many historians view Anabaptists as the most radical wing of the Protestant Reformation—they not only rebelled against the Roman Catholic church, they disagreed with Protestant leaders, such as Zwingli, Luther and Calvin, over the issue of state-sanctioned religious practices.

The Anabaptists objected to infant baptism, which made each citizen a member of a state-controlled church; they advocated baptism when an individual is old enough to make a conscious choice to be a Christian. Thus the early followers of this radical form of Christianity, all of whom had been baptized as infants, underwent a second baptism within their own circles—hence the name “ana,” meaning “re” (as in *repeating* the baptism) before the root word “baptist.” The name Anabaptist was rejected by the first generation of people who objected to infant baptism—they tended to refer to themselves as “Brethren” (Bender et al., “Anabaptism” par. 10). “Anabaptist” originally was an epithet implying both treason against the state and religious heresy, akin to being called a “Bolshevik” or “Communist” in 1950s America. The early re-baptizers viewed baptism “as the sign of lay emancipation from clerical control and the spiritual enfranchisement of lay people”—in short, as symbolic of the “priesthood of all believers” (par. 31).

Ethics-based Movement

In *Mennonite Society*, sociologist Calvin Redekop explains that the “Anabaptist Mennonite Utopian movement was much more an ethical response than a creedal one,”

emphasizing “the application of the basic Christian beliefs in personal and social life,” rather than “abstract doctrine which was then expressed in elaborate ecclesiastical liturgy and litanies” (55).

Anabaptists shared the Protestants’ dismay over the centuries of decadence and hypocrisy that they perceived in the Catholic Church, but they differed on their answers. The Anabaptists advocated a community of people voluntarily committed to following the teachings of Jesus Christ as faithfully as possible, with leadership decentralized among the “priesthood of believers” rather than concentrated in the hands of professional clergy (Klaassen, *Anabaptism* 32). Their actual gathering location (that is, a building called a “church” or “cathedral”) was deemed irrelevant. In fact, expensive, ornate churches were viewed as signs of misappropriating and misusing wealth that should be applied toward alleviating suffering.

Like the Franciscans of the thirteenth century and other mystically oriented monastic orders of earlier times, the majority of early Anabaptists took to heart Jesus’ model of living simply and non-hierarchically, relieving suffering, being peaceable and “nonresistant,” and treating each other as fellow disciples awaiting the return of Christ (60-61). Because of their focus on one’s direct experience of God, some of the early Anabaptists believed that God could communicate with humans in a variety of ways, including with pagans, Jews and Moslems, assuming they felt “the direct presence of God in their souls” (61).

The early Anabaptists believed in closing the gap between the rich and poor. One of them, Balthasar Hubmaier, wrote:

Concerning community of goods, I have always said that everyone should be concerned about the needs of others, so that the hungry might be fed, the thirsty given drink, and the naked clothed. For we are not lords of our possessions, but stewards and distributors. There is certainly no one who says that another's goods may be seized and made common; rather, he would gladly give the coat in addition to the shirt. (56)³

In their efforts to live equitably, the Anabaptists were hearkening back to the era when Christians lived at a subsistence level under Roman totalitarianism. The earliest

³ Klaassen quoted this from P. J. Klassen, *The Economics of Anabaptism*, The Hague: Mouton, 1964, p. 32.

Christians were burdened with high taxes to underwrite the cost of Roman rule. They survived by living “in large, extended families, caring for each other, sharing possessions, demanding a high level of trust, never thinking of yourself as a rugged individualist—or even as a separate individual at all,” writes Reta Finger (267). “Sociologists call these ‘kin-groups,’ whose shared economic life is called ‘generalized reciprocity.’ . . . Many people in developing countries still survive only by this method of social security” (267). Of the various branches of Anabaptists, only the Hutterites chose to form communities where the goods are entirely owned in common, but all branches put emphasis—from the early days to today—on the “haves” assisting the “have-nots.”

Differing from Catholics and Protestants

The Anabaptists raised the ire of both the Catholics and the Protestants. In their anticlericalism, the Anabaptists had kinship with other movements of the “common man” of that era, including the peasant uprisings of the 1520s (Bender and Stayer, par.1). Martin Luther's reformation did not extend to the sharing of goods, and he did not display strong empathy with the downtrodden. In 1523, Luther urged the princes to violently stamp out the peasants' rebellion (Finger 264). Finger observes:

John Calvin was even more negative. Luke was describing not a literal community of goods, he thought, but a spiritual unity. . . . Calvin was at pains to clarify this “on account of fanatical spirits who devise a *koinonia* of good whereby all civil order is overturned.” Here he has the Anabaptists in mind because “they thought there was no church unless all men's goods were heaped up together and everyone took therefrom as they chose” (*Acts of the Apostles 1-13, Calvin's Commentaries*). Calvin was convinced economic equality would destroy civil order. (264)

Menno Simons (ca. 1496-1561), the former Catholic priest from whose name the word “Mennonite” comes, spoke bitterly about those who call themselves Christians, but who live in luxury while others live in stark want. Writing of the Protestant clergy in 1552, Simons said:

Many of them have plenty of everything, go about in silk and velvet, gold and silver, and in all manner of pomp and splendor; ornament their houses with all manner of costly furniture; have their coffers filled, and live in luxury and splendor, yet they suffer many of their own poor, afflicted members (notwithstanding their fellow believers have received one baptism and partaken of the same bread with them) to ask alms; and poor,

hungry, suffering, old, lame, blind, and sick people to beg their bread at their doors. (Klaassen, *Anabaptism* 55)

Simons did not agree with Luther that faith alone could enable a believer to achieve salvation by God's grace (27). Simons thought proof that one was a Christian derived from how that person lived his life and, conversely, that living in a manner different from one's professed faith was reprehensible. Addressing himself to the Catholics and the Protestants, Simons wrote:

Observe what fruits and profits your office and service brings forth. . . . Your sacraments are an encouragement to the impenitent and your lives examples of wickedness. Where are the greedy whom you have made liberal, the drunkards whom you have made temperate, the impure you have made chaste, the proud whom you have humbled? How will you teach others, being yourselves untaught, and beget unto Christ a well-pleasing church. . . . For with you we do not find contrite hearts, true knowledge of Christ, true love, and earnest desire after the Kingdom of God, dying to earthly things, true humility, righteousness, friendliness, mercy, chastity, obedience, wisdom, truth, and peace. But everywhere we find hatred, envy, hard and cruel hearts, a loathing aversion and disdain for the divine Word, love and desire of the world, haughtiness, pride, pomp, lies, trickery, shame, adultery, fornication, robbery, burning, slaying, cursing, and all manner of wickedness. (42)

Saying "I confess—I am a sinner" and "I am sorry" were not sufficient for Simons and the Anabaptists he influenced. Believers had to show by their conduct that they were different people as a result of following Christ:

All may find a place in their sect who will but keep their ceremonies, and acknowledge them to be the true preachers and messengers, no matter how they live. . . . No drunkard, no avaricious or pompous person, no defiler of women, no cheat or liar, no thief, robber, or shedder of blood (I mean in the conduct of warfare), no curser or swearer so great and ungodly but he must be called a Christian. If he but say, I am sorry, then all is ascribed to his weakness and imperfection and he is admitted to the Lord's Supper, for, say they, he is saved by grace and not by merits. He remains a member of their church even though he is an impenitent and hardened godless heathen today as yesterday and tomorrow as today. (28)

None of this endeared the Anabaptists to the leaders of the majority religion wherever the Anabaptists lived, whether Catholic or Protestant. Like the Franciscans, who eventually were forced by the Roman Catholic hierarchy to give up their founder's rigorous poverty, simple lifestyle, and absolute service to the poor (60-61), the

Anabaptists were viewed as treacherous extremists by both the Catholics and the Protestants of the sixteenth century. “By its enemies Anabaptism was regarded as a dangerous movement—a program for the violent destruction of Europe's religious and social institutions” (1). In an effort to sum up the path that early Anabaptists took, Klaassen used the term “third way” (viii),⁴ in reference to being neither Catholic nor Protestant. In Chapter 5, this “third way” will be explored in relation to the modern Mennonites.

The Anabaptists were revolutionary in challenging positions held by authorities and the majority of the populace. “They sought, in non-violent ways, to bring about change from one situation to another more nearly representative of God's will” (Klaassen, *Anabaptism* 9).

Living Separately

Walter Klaassen argued that the Anabaptists were the first religious group during the Reformation to advocate the separation of church and state: “The simple fact of the matter is that Anabaptists, along with a few other individuals such as Sebastian Franck and Sebastian Castellio, were the first ones to raise claims for religious liberty.” The following words of Zwingli reveal not only that he rejected religious liberty, but also accepted violently coercive tactics: “Why should the Christian magistrate not destroy statues and abolish the Mass? . . . This does not mean he has to cut the priests' throats if it is possible to avoid such a cruel action. But if not, we would not hesitate to imitate even the harshest examples.” As for Martin Luther, this is what he wrote in 1526: “Though it is not our intention to prescribe to anyone what he is to hold or believe, yet we will not tolerate any sect or division in our principality, in order to prevent harmful revolt and other mischief.” Calvin “was opposed to all forms of religious toleration and insisted that one had to rid oneself of all feelings of humanity in the treatment of heretics.” Klaassen

⁴ Myron Augsburger credits Paul M. Lederach's 1980 book of sermons, *A Third Way, Conversations About Anabaptist/Mennonite Faith*, for helping to introduce the term “a third way” to Mennonites, in reference to Jesus standing in the “third way,” the way of the kingdom of God (170). Klaassen used “third way” more specifically to refer to the way Anabaptists deviated from both Catholics and Protestants in the sixteenth century. A “third way” was adopted in the late twentieth century to describe the fact that Anabaptists do not fit neatly into the political Left-Right paradigm or even the Christian-Muslim schism of the contemporary world. A popular website run by and on Mennonites is www.thirdway.com.

acknowledged the claim that religious liberty is rooted in the Protestant Reformation, but noted wryly that it would be more accurate to say that “religious pluralism” developed in that era, because the Protestants and Catholics found that they could not militarily exterminate one another and thus they came to tolerate each other. (Quotes & comments in this paragraph are from Klaassen, “Radical Politics” 154.)

The Anabaptists sought to embody their “third way” by establishing disciplined communities of believers (9). These communities evolved into being set apart from the outside world, more rigidly so in some places and times than in others. Since this focus on separateness was not articulated by the earliest Anabaptists, it may have developed out of a quest to survive. Modern Anabaptist theologians have tended to attribute their people’s non-conformity to Romans 12:2: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (*RSV*).⁵ Other biblical passages led the Anabaptists to feel that they could be the New Testament version of the chosen people, such as 1 Peter 2:9 (*RSV*): “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

Ironically, as radical dissenters, the earliest Anabaptists must have been individualistic and self-motivated, even if they formed communities. It took non-conforming self-assertiveness to embrace these radical minority practices: no hierarchical clergy between the lay believer and God; no liturgical rituals conducted by rote; and no sacred singing or scripture recitation that the average person couldn’t understand.

Anabaptists as Martyrs

The *Martyrs’ Mirror*—a massive tome first published in Dutch in 1660—describes the gruesome deaths and sometimes final words of more than 800 of the Anabaptists who were killed between 1525 and 1618 for their beliefs, 613 of them from the Netherlands and Belgium (van der Zijpp et al. *Martyrs*, par. 2).⁶ They were a fraction

⁵ In fact, this biblical passage remains the clearest of a half dozen which serve as validation for the separatism of today’s Amish, Old Order Mennonites, and Hutterites.

⁶ In many (probably the majority) of Anabaptist homes from the 1700s to this day, the *Martyrs’ Mirror* occupies an honored place, alongside the Bible (Klaassen, *Anabaptism* 7-8).

of the thousands of Anabaptists put to death by magistrates doing the bidding of either the Catholic or Protestant church, depending on which church officially held power in districts that are now within the borders of Switzerland, Germany, France, and the Netherlands. The early martyrs were far from being stoical Mennonite farmers with submissive wives, as a modern-day person might imagine.

- Nearly a third of the early martyrs were women. Nobody told them to let themselves have their tongues ripped out, be burned at the stake or drowned. In their pre-death statements, it is clear that they, and they alone, were making the choice to die for their faith. “It is generally accepted that early Anabaptism gave women relatively equal status and function,” says sociologist Calvin Redekop (*Power* 176).⁷
- The early martyrs tended to be urban dwellers originating among the intelligentsia, nobility, clergy, or crafts-producers. This was especially true in the Netherlands, where not one of the 161 martyrs was a farmer (Kauffman and Driedger 29). Years of severe persecution, however, deprived the early Anabaptist church of these urban-based leaders and caused it to defensively disperse into rural areas, where the communities necessarily focused on farming to sustain themselves (29).

Establishing Community Boundaries

“The situation surrounding the Anabaptist church called for strong discipline. In a world that applied all of its pressures to crush the little company of believers one could not be casual about following Christ” (Klaassen, *Anabaptism* 29). These are the circumstances under which the Anabaptists turned toward “shunning” or banning an individual—that is, cutting off contact—as a means of expressing the community’s disapproval of waywardness and of reinforcing its norms. These norms were seen as biblically based, though some (in historic hindsight) were clearly cultural (Redekop, *Mennonite* 132).

⁷ Within 50 years, all branches of Anabaptism shifted to entirely male-dominated leadership, and they remained so until recently, when women began to be ordained as pastors in the most modern groups of Anabaptists (Redekop, *Mennonite* 103).

Compared to the draconian, violent ways that the Anabaptists were experiencing enforced conformity under the prevailing powers, shunning was a relatively benign form of discipline for this historical period. In any case, it takes “a strong sense of community . . . for this sanction to have any power against the sinning individual,” Redekop notes (132). “Shunning was based on blocking the normal interactions of an individual with his community, with his support structure. But if the sinning person did not interact, or did not wish to interact, with the ‘elect’ or ‘the saints,’ shunning was of no consequence; it was literally not possible. Outside of the community context, the practice of shunning had absolutely no power” (132).

The German term *Gelassenheit*—meaning “yieldedness to God’s will” and “self-denial,” or in today’s favored term, “humility”—is a common descriptive for the early Anabaptist/Mennonite spirit.

Hans Denck may have popularized the idea among early Anabaptists and summarized the idea effectively when he said, “There is no other way to blessedness than to lose one’s self-will.” . . . *Gelassenheit* provided a language for understanding martyrdom and the costs of discipleship in the early Anabaptist experience. On the social level, it meant that individuals were to resist selfish ambitions and embrace the qualities of meekness and lowliness. (Ainlay 138)

Unsettled Communities

Against the backdrop of the late Middle Ages, Anabaptist communities were largely oases of “order and wisdom in the midst of chaos and folly” (Klaassen, *Anabaptism* 142). There were a couple of notable exceptions to this, however—groups of Anabaptists rose to the calls of evangelist Melchior Hoffman and took up arms to occupy two cities while awaiting the millennial return of Christ, which they believed to be imminent. These episodes came to a tragic end for the Anabaptists—in April 1535 at Bolsward (now in the Netherlands) and in July 1535 at Münster in Westphalia (northwestern Germany)—with both cities re-taken by their former ruling authorities and many Anabaptists killed. Menno Simons wrote that these misguided Anabaptists, who thought they could usher in the kingdom of God by force, catalyzed his decision to publicly advocate for the true path, as he understood it. In opposition to violent rebellion,

Simons supported “nonresistance” (“pacifism” in modern terminology) and “a theology of martyrdom, of suffering for God” (Friedmann, par. 1).

Persecution and wars (involving military conscription, which the Anabaptists opposed) in Europe and Prussia kept Anabaptists moving as entire communities from the sixteenth century into the twentieth century. Whatever “oases” they established generally did not endure more than a few generations. “By the time of the Thirty Years’ War [1618-1648] practically all the Anabaptists in South and Middle Germany had been converted, exiled, or executed” (Bender et al. *Germany*, par. 15). Dutch and German Mennonites responded to William Penn’s invitation to enjoy religious freedom in Pennsylvania and came to North America, starting in the 1680s (Bender *Religious Liberty*, par. 5). Some Swiss Mennonites moved into France’s Jura mountains and valleys and Alsace-Lorraine, beginning in the early 1700s (Krahn et al. *Migrations*, par. 12). Emigrants from the Netherlands resettled in northwest Germany and Prussia beginning in the 1530s; some of their descendants then moved to Russia beginning in 1788 (Krahn and Sawatsky, par. 9). In sum, Mennonites were either eliminated, forced to keep moving after a generation or two, or assimilated into the rest of society in most of Europe.

Chapter 2

Lessons from Dutch-Mennonite History

In the aftermath of the demise of the small group of Anabaptists who followed Melchior Hoffman, Simons wrote about his troubled conscience:

The blood of these people, although misled, fell so hot upon my heart that I could not stand it, nor find rest in my soul. . . . I saw that these zealous children, although in error, willingly gave their lives . . . for their doctrine and their faith. And I was one of those who had disclosed to some of them the abominations of the papal system. But I continued in my comfortable life and acknowledged abominations simply in order that I might enjoy physical comfort and escape the Cross of Christ. (qtd. in Krahn and Dyck, par. 9)

Simons became the most influential voice of Anabaptist beliefs and practices in East Friesland and in the “Low Countries,” or what is now the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, parts of northern France and northwestern Germany. When he criticized people who “go about in silk and velvet, gold and silver and in all manner of pomp and splendor,” while largely ignoring the needs of the “poor” and “afflicted,” Simons was voicing what became the prevailing views of the Dutch Anabaptists in their first 50 years of existence. When Simons spoke of the need for “true humility, righteousness, friendliness, mercy, chastity, obedience, wisdom, truth, and peace,” he was alluding to virtues that the early Anabaptists of his region strived to embody. By the time of his death in 1561, however, Simons’ fellowship of believers was splitting over whether—not to mention, how—to enforce compliance with these standards.

The question of church discipline was presented at a large conference of South German Anabaptists which met at Strasbourg in 1557. Some 50 representatives of congregations in various South German countries, such as Moravia, Switzerland, and Alsace, were present. The assembled elders sent an appeal to Menno and his co-workers not to go to extremes in the matter of ban and avoidance, through which even family life was disrupted [i.e., if a spouse was deemed errant, the non-erring spouse was supposed to avoid him or her]. Menno and Dirk Philips responded in writing, defending the more rigid position. Menno now emphasized that the heavenly marriage between Christ and the soul is more important than the relationship of man and wife in the earthly marriage. (Krahn and Dyck, par. 32)

The last Anabaptist martyr in the Netherlands was killed in 1574; the Union of Utrecht in 1579 (just five years later) provided for freedom of religious belief (Dyck 129).⁸ This set the stage for a society that was comparatively tolerant of Anabaptists, permitting Anabaptists to play significant roles in the Dutch Golden Age beginning at the end of the sixteenth century.

Not Mennos, Just “Baptism-Minded”

By the late 1500s “when their expectation of the coming kingdom was not fulfilled,” the Dutch Mennonites gradually emerged from their church communities to become involved in greater civil society, government service, and cultural activities (van der Zijpp et al. *Netherlands*, par. 33). Yet they retained certain distinctive attributes, such as a reputation for probity and hard work, which served them well in the coming century:

The strict, not to say proverbial, Mennonite morality appears to have had a positive effect on this process of assimilation which started in the late sixteenth century. From then onwards numerous Mennonites turned into successful businessmen and industrialists and proved themselves in a variety of cultural and intellectual pursuits. (Visser vii)

As a sign that they were distancing themselves from Simons’ doctrine of separation, from the early 1700s onward, the Dutch Mennonites called themselves the *doopsgezinden* (“baptism-minded”), rather than the more distinguishing names of *menisten* or *mennoniten* (Voolstra, *Menno Faith* 277).

A century after the death of Simons (i.e., by the 1660s), members of the Waterlander church could be disciplined—that is, refused communion—if they did any of the following: hold a government office; swear an oath; use weapons; serve in the military; own shares in an armed ship; go to a judge before going to the church to settle disputes; marry someone of another faith; go bankrupt; partake in drunkenness; quarrel too much domestically; and engage in extramarital sexual relations (Sprunger, *Rich* 205).

⁸ By the end of the 1700s, church-state separation was the law, giving all stripes of Christians and Jews the same rights, at least in principle (Verbeek and Hoekema 57).

Impact of Wealth

These church rules represented lingering, but rapidly fading, standards of behavior for the Dutch Mennonites. In *An Introduction to Mennonite History: A Popular History of the Anabaptists and the Mennonites*, Cornelius J. Dyck notes that “a century or more after the Mennonites suffered deeply for their faith, they were tolerated and many were wealthy. Many no longer believed deeply in the things for which their fathers and mothers had died. Ease and luxury had done what persecution could not do” (130-131).

Hans de Ries, who lived from 1553 to 1638 and was a leader among the Waterlander-Mennonite group, wrote a history of the early Mennonite martyrs that was published in 1615 (Dyck 127). This became the basis of the now-iconic *Martyrs' Mirror* published in 1660. Both works were intended to remind Anabaptists of the heritage of their martyred ancestors and to call them back to their theological and social roots (127).

In a sermon written shortly before his death in 1638 at age 85, de Ries observed that from the time of his youth to his old age, his Waterlander church (located in Amsterdam) had moved from being poor and persecuted to being socially acceptable and wealthy, but at the cost of losing spiritual vigor: “The goods are enriched but the soul is impoverished. Clothing has become precious but the internal decorations have perished. Love has diminished and quarreling has increased” (131).

The sense of being brothers and sisters under God, equitably bearing the hardships of following in the way of Christ, had eroded. Congregations began to be stratified into three groups: a minority who were wealthy, constituting about 10 percent in the Waterlander group (Sprunger, *Mutual Aid* 147); a middle-class of mainly craftsmen and small merchants, who could survive without handouts under normal circumstances; and the poor, who needed material aid and who comprised about 15 to 18% of the Waterlander church members in the mid 1600s (Sprunger, *Rich* 229).

Plea for Christian Ethics

Jacob Pietersz van de Koog, a Mennonite pastor who lived in the Netherlands from 1599 to 1671, argued for better business ethics in a remarkable work, *Introduction to a Proper Use of Temporal Goods*, translated by Mary Sprunger. Pietersz said the Bible called for Christians to share their wealth with the poor and to be responsible for how money was earned and spent:

An upright Christian should continually take care in seeking worldly profits that he does not make money through harm to his neighbors; for if he seeks to gain some profits but knows that he will cause his neighbor equal or more loss, how can that be in accordance with love? (Sprunger, *Rich* 61)

In the treatment of workers and servants, Pietersz argued against Christians becoming rich through the labor of others and against setting wages so low that laborers “must suffer want” (62). He thought that surplus wealth—that is, wealth beyond that necessary for comfortable sustenance—should be applied to benefit the poor rather than wasted on pomp and ornamentation to feed one’s pride and “to gain the respect of the world” (65). As a result, he saw no reason for decoration on houses, ships, rooms, chests and cabinets, noting that these simply burdened the cleaning staff. He thought paintings, sculptures and other images also served no purpose and were contrary to the Ten Commandments. “The surplus that one could use to serve the poor is wasted unnecessarily for the pleasure of the eyes and importance of men” (65-66).

Pietersz decried the lack of clear moral guidelines in his era in the Netherlands, leading to a state of “great unlimited freedom” (64). Similar to a Christian-socialist of modern times, Pietersz believed humans are simply stewards of God's goods and thus charged to use them responsibly (63). He advocated a moderate lifestyle to ensure moral use of goods (68). He did not accept the argument of some of his compatriots that they were serving God by consuming and appreciating the finer aspects of creation, such as silk fabrics and expensive food and drink. Citizens who indulge in acquiring and exhibiting showy material goods—often “things that cost more money, and bring less warmth, and are no more durable” (65)—are exhibiting the fruits of pride, regardless of their excuses, he said. Conversely, Pietersz did not call for living in poverty—he did not feel that suffering was God’s will for anybody (64).

Charity Rather Than Equity

Through the latter part of the 1600s and into the early 1700s, many well-to-do Mennonites demonstrated a sincere desire to use their wealth responsibly as Christian disciples. Through their activities and resources, “Mennonite cultural, social, and even political influence in the Netherlands grew stronger than Mennonites have enjoyed anywhere else at any time” (Dyck 158). As examples of such beneficence, Dutch

Mennonites provided relief to Mennonite colonies in the Palatinate, Prussia and Poland during their hard times in 1693, 1711 and 1713. The Dutch also gave refuge to Swiss Mennonites fleeing persecution. Some Dutch Mennonites founded a society to aid families of men lost at sea and others set up foundations to support museums and scientific research (158).

Yet the growing distance of Mennonites from their modest roots was highlighted by a popular playwright and poet, Pieter Langendijk (1683-1755), who produced a satirical poem in 1713 that described how Dutch Anabaptists relished the trappings of success. The poem, entitled “Swiss simplicity, lamenting the corrupt manners of many Dutch Doopsgezinden or nonresistant Christians,” features a female Mennonite refugee from Switzerland (personified as “Swiss Simplicity”). She receives some charitable aid from her Dutch brethren, but feels disgusted with their spiritual impoverishment, as exemplified by their immersion in splendor and vanity (Visser 67).

Langendijk was the son of a Quaker mother and Mennonite father, but his writings showed him to be at home among upper class, urban Mennonites in the Netherlands. His Swiss narrator “describes a social gathering in the mansion of an Amsterdam Mennonite—still to be seen on the canals—where the socialites display their fatuity in fancy rituals, courtlike greetings and conversations between the new lords and their ladies, where men in powdered and full-bottomed wigs eat, drink and socialize with their silk-laced companions” (70).

The Mennonites’ wealth came from economic activity. Trade with Greenland and the whaling and fishing industries were almost entirely in Mennonite hands (Dyck 130). Shipping routes and trade to the Baltic Sea region were heavily controlled by Mennonites. They were prominent in shipbuilding and the lumber business, in agriculture and the food industry, and in textiles. Mennonites became physicians and engineers who helped to drain the swamps of Holland (130). The separation of church and state became less of a concern as Mennonites began to be mayors and other government officials (Verbeek and Hoekema 68-69). By the early eighteenth century, Mennonites were heavily invested in trade to the East and West Indies, which linked them to use of weaponry, since sailors and ships on the Indies routes were armed to ward off pirates

(Sprunger, *Rich* 228). Some Mennonite families increased their wealth by investing in banks (228).

Artists of the Dutch Golden Age

With the support of wealthy patrons in the 1700s, playwrights, poets, painters, and other artists of Mennonite origin came to the fore. For instance, Karel van Mander, who lived from 1548 to 1606, was a poet, painter, manager of an art school, and composer of devotional music (Visser 70). Waterlander preacher Lambert Jacobsz was also a well-known painter (70). One of the most prominent poets and playwrights of the seventeenth century, Joost van de Vondel (1587-1679), went from being a deacon among the Waterlander Mennonites to being a Roman Catholic around 1640. Jan Luyken (1649-1712) was well-known for his poetry and etchings (Dyck 130). An appendix compiled by Piet Visser for his chapter in *From Martyr to Muppy* contains the names of nearly 100 minor and major Dutch-Mennonite writers, including a few women, living between 1600-1800 (82). Most of them, noted Visser, wrote on themes that had nothing to do with Anabaptism.

Mennonite artists were fully engaged with the wider society in which they lived. As an example, if massive, starched-and-pressed collars were the fashion of the day—as they were in 1649—then many Mennonites went along with this fashion statement, despite the high price of these collars and the hired help needed to maintain them. As apparent from oil paintings of that era by Rembrandt and his peers, Mennonites wearing such collars (along with fur trim, satin, embroidery, fancy hats and other fashionable attire) were not uncommon, to the dismay of Pietersz, who viewed such fashion practices as wasteful and self-indulgent (Sprunger, *Rich* 64-66).

Centuries earlier in the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church was the main patron of the arts and thus medieval paintings, sculpture, poetry, plays, and music reflected Catholic themes. With the transition to the era known as the Enlightenment, “it was now primarily the new political and economic elite which created a demand for artistic products, for paintings and poetry” (Visser 70). There was a shift to the *burgermoraal*, or the civic morality desired by “merchants, bankers, ship owners and civil governors” (70).

Both the painter and the poet were generally considered as contributors to the moral standards of society. Seventeenth-century paintings, poems and

plays were supposed to contain a Christian message, to serve the purpose of a moral, general edification besides providing other lessons, such as the reasonable rule of government. Even a painting of a simple domestic scene depicting a kitchen maid sitting by the open fire was usually not just a reproduction of a cozy reality, but also contained some generally recognized truths about vices and virtues, good and evil. (70)

Reason-Based Morality

Part of the “civic morality” practiced by Mennonites in the upper rungs of society was using some of their profits to help the needy. Generous contributions to the poor, however, did not preclude conspicuous consumption at the individual level (Sprunger, *Rich* 236). As previously noted, dispersing charity in the Netherlands in the seventeenth century was viewed as responsible and as appropriately Anabaptist-Christian, but the earlier Dutch-Anabaptists’ suspicion of accumulating private wealth had disappeared. No prominent Dutch-Anabaptist was advocating communal sharing (236).

Concurrent with, and fueling, the movement toward Anabaptist assimilation was the rationalist ideology of the Enlightenment.

The Enlightenment was an eighteenth-century movement characterized by love for the scientific method and a consequent questioning of anything which seemed irrational, including the authority of the Bible, the church, and tradition. . . . Particularly noticeable among the Mennonites was also the individualism which the Enlightenment brought; people were free to do their own believing, to write their own confession of faith, and to interpret the Bible for themselves and by themselves. (Dyck 391)

“Tolerant Netherlands” was a refuge in the seventeenth century for controversial thinkers like Descartes, Spinoza and Locke. Influenced by these philosophers, many Mennonite intellectuals gravitated toward the Collegiants, “an anti-ecclesiastical religious movement that advocated rational interpretation of Scripture” (Sprunger, *Rich* 235).

Distinctive Characteristics Slide Away

Under external and internal pressures from wider society, church discipline loosened, along with the keeping of ordinances such as foot washing (Dyck 158). When the state terminated Mennonites’ right not to serve in the military in 1799, little objection came from the Mennonites (158). Starting in the late seventeenth century, membership in the Dutch Mennonite churches went into a steady decline, with some congregations withering away and others merging to stay afloat (Dyck 158; Sprunger, *Rich* 234).

A 1835 sermon by Dr. K. S. Sybrandi, a Mennonite preacher in Groningen, decries how assimilated his people had become:

We live more in and alas also more for the world. More enlightened, less cramped and less narrow-minded in our own view than our forefathers, we confidently engage in all sorts of social and convivial intercourse, even including slippery paths from which they kept well away, bearing the Apostolic lesson in mind, “do not become the world's like, nor the like of what is in the world!” . . . This was not the way of our forefathers. Even if they could have obtained such worldly advantages, distinctions, offices and insignias, yes even if these had been offered to them, I believe they would have refused, considering suchlike to be a danger to the preservation of pure conscience and to leading a Christian life, with humility for man and in submission to God. (qtd. in Voolstra, *Muppy* 195)

The Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century gave rise to a new socio-economic elite, who tended to believe that people at the bottom of the economic pyramid were suffering due to their own individual shortcomings (188). The more socially engaged members of the elite, including leading Dutch Mennonites, focused on ethical Christian education and well-being for everyone in their society based on commonly recognized values and morals (200). As an example, the Society for Public Welfare was founded in the home of a Mennonite preacher in 1784, growing from 345 members in 1785 to 13,892 members in 1840 (192-193). Well-to-do Mennonites supported lending libraries, savings banks, insurance companies, and Rousseau-inspired educational programs (200).

By the end of the nineteenth century, adult baptism was one of the two remaining distinguishing characteristics of Dutch Mennonites. Baptism was no longer the mark of separating from a sinful world, but a sign of becoming an ethical, responsible adult (201). The remaining distinction was a refusal to swear oaths, though the meaning of this too had changed: it no longer indicated total loyalty to God but allowed the person to benefit from the Mennonite reputation for being a person of his or her word (201).

Menno Simons' advocacy for non-resistance was now a quaint historical footnote. The distinction between Christian duty and civic duty was gone (201). When there was an uprising in Belgium in 1830, two students and one former student at the Mennonite seminary in the Netherlands responded to the Dutch army's call for volunteers, and others itched to go (201). In 1861, the congregation at Emden had among its members Isaac

Brons, president of the East Friesland Navy League (Dyck 388). The shrinking Mennonite churches made no effort at church discipline, given the tilt toward valuing the individual over the congregational community (Voolstra, *Muppy* 201). By World War I, pacifism was largely a historical footnote for the Mennonites in Western Europe (Dyck 388). On the eve of World War II, enough Dutch Mennonites sympathized with the National Socialist Movement in Germany that their churches tried to avoid discussions on politics for fear of splintering (Verbeek and Hoekema 84-85).

Disappearing Church Members

In 1700—in the middle of the Golden Age, 139 years after Simons' death—there were about 160,000 Mennonites in the Netherlands (158). In 1808, there were only 26,953, with one congregation closing per year on the average (388). In the early part of the twentieth century, a partial and gradual recovery occurred, with membership increasing to 39,000 (389), but this was followed by another decline, leading to baptized membership of 25,589 in 1978 and 18,000 in 1990 (158).

So, what caused the near-disappearance of Anabaptism in the homeland of Menno Simons, where so many early Anabaptists sacrificed their lives for their beliefs? Ironically, it may have been the relative religious tolerance in the Netherlands, coupled with the allure for Mennonites of economic prosperity and social power, that sounded their death-knell as a distinctive religious group.

Outside of the Netherlands, the Mennonite groups that survived from the 1500s into the 1900s were those forced to the edges of their societies, causing them to live in relative isolation. Eventually, some of them opted to live as separately as possible from the “outside world,” choosing to farm or otherwise work mainly within their own communities. Unlike the Mennonites living in the Netherlands, these Mennonites ended up in ethnic-minority clusters, holding onto their original language in the geographic locations where they tried to take refuge. Ironically, the ongoing discrimination they experienced and resulting isolation may have given them the space they needed to maintain beliefs and practices that were significantly different from the surrounding majority culture. “As North American Mennonites have discovered in the twentieth century, community boundaries are hard to define and maintain in an urban setting where church members interact daily with non-members” (Sprunger, *Rich* 235).

Two contemporary thinkers based at the University of Amsterdam—Sjouke Woolstra, professor of Anabaptist/Mennonite theology and history, and Piet Visser, curator of the Church Historical Collections Department—suggested in *From Martyr to Muppy* that the experience of Mennonites in the Netherlands makes a good study for the identity struggles—and the declining membership— of modern Mennonites in North America. In a 1991 article, Woolstra noted how urbanized Mennonites in both societies have tended to move away from a communal-based faith derived from a biblically authoritative, objective form of a confession or doctrine. Instead, these Mennonites have embraced an individual-based “subjectivist, psychologizing, and ethicizing” approach to Christianity (“Mennonite Faith” 290)—or rejected faith altogether. Viewed through Woolstra’s lens, the final stage in this declining faith is marked by the lingering urges of its inheritors to express “faith of the heart” in “daily living” and “good works” (289). Wrote Visser:

Is it not significant that some urban congregations in America should have removed the name “Mennonite” from their church buildings for social reasons? [Ironically] Mennonite contributions to the wider [American] culture are growing and receiving more and more general approval and appreciation by non-Mennonite recipients. There are parallels between the Dutch Mennonite past and present-day Mennonite life in the United States and Canada which deserve more intensive study. (72)

Modern-Living Mennonites in North America

Woolstra’s concerns about the decline of Mennonites in modern America are validated by surveys done on behalf of the Mennonite Church USA and its predecessors.

In 2001, the Anabaptists under the umbrellas of the General Conference and the Mennonite Church officially blended themselves into the Mennonite Church USA, partly in an effort to stem the loss of members from both traditions.⁹ That goal has not been realized. From 1989 to 2008, the membership of Mennonite Church USA (with its

⁹ One of the criteria for the artists surveyed for this dissertation was that their original church-communities or families were affiliated with what is now known as Mennonite Church USA. Hence the Mennonite-Brethren stream of Anabaptists are beyond the scope of this study, as are the Canadian Mennonites.

founding conferences) dropped from 130,329 to 106,172 (Kanagy 49 and ARDA data), with no reversal of the trend after the 2001 merger. This loss amounts to an exodus of one percent of the membership each year for the last 19 years. In another telling sign, the average member's age is rising: in 1989, it was 49; in 2006, it was 54 (Kanagy 55). The only growth area for the Mennonite church—and this growth obviously is not happening fast enough to offset the overall membership decline—is in what Kanagy calls “Racial/Ethnic congregations.” From 2000 to 2006, one out of every four (25 percent) new members was Racial/Ethnic, compared to six percent among those who entered the denomination six or more years ago (52). The majority of these new members—heavily Indonesians, Vietnamese and Latinos—were born outside the United States (53).

Some observers blame the Anabaptists' traditional propensity for schism for their diminishing numbers, at least in North America. Certainly, there have been constant squabbles that have led to the pruning and forming of dozens of new off-shoots from each branch of Anabaptism (Kniss 2). In the absence of a hierarchically centralized church system, “the Anabaptist community could not and did not resort to force to compel erring members to change their minds and ways. Hence there was a limit on its power to preserve unity” (Klaassen, *Anabaptism* 62-63).¹⁰ Yet Julius Rubin, a sociology of religion professor at Connecticut's Saint Joseph College who has extensively studied cults, feels there is a positive aspect to the frequent schisms among traditional Mennonites: they may prevent Anabaptist sects from deteriorating into authoritarian cults (189). By contrast, he says a 1920s-founded group that claims to be Anabaptist, the Bruderhof, has evolved into an autocratic organization with hereditary male leadership that uses psychological and even physical abuse to ensure obedience (174).¹¹

¹⁰ In today's world of managers trained in conflict resolution techniques—and with books like *Promise and Peril: Understanding and Managing Change and Conflict in Congregations* (Alban Institute, 2009) by EMU professor David Brubaker—one might hope that Mennonite congregations could find ways to stay together or at least to amicably spin off sister congregations.

¹¹ The accusation that the Bruderhof is a cult seems universal among ex-members after they have adjusted to life outside of the Bruderhof (i.e., after several years on the outside). Most of them emerged individually from the Bruderhof at different times under varying circumstances. From 1989 to 2001, their stories appeared regularly in the KIT (Keep In Touch) Newsletter (issues downloadable at www.perefound.org/knsltrs.html). The publisher of KIT is the non-profit Peregrine Foundation, run by a former Bruderhof member. Peregrine has issued the following books by ex-members: Roger Allain's *The Community That Failed*, Elizabeth Bohlken-Zumpe's *Torches Extinguished—Memories of a Communal*

Another possible plus to the schisms is that any person with Mennonite inclinations can probably find some group in North America where he or she would feel comfortable—ranging from plain-dressing Mennonites taking somber vehicles to quiet services with a cappella singing, to denim-clad Mennonites motorcycling to services filled with amplified instrumental music. Some Mennonites meet in homes or school auditoriums. Others have churches that are so non-descript they could be old barns, and maybe even are. Some Mennonite churches are as beautifully elaborate as a typical well-appointed Episcopal church. Thirty-four percent of those affiliated with the Mennonite Church USA are transfers from other denominations (Kanagy 54).¹² In fact, the diversity among modern-day Mennonites is great enough that the most relevant question today might be: Do Mennonites continue to embody values that make them coherent with each other and at least somewhat distinctive from non-Mennonites?

In later chapters, we will see evidence that Mennonites in the twenty-first century do, on the whole, uphold distinctive values—ones that are worthy of preservation and emulation. But we will also see that the kinds of forces eroding the Dutch Mennonite community in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, resulting in its virtual disappearance, are evident in modern Mennonite communities in North America today.¹³

Mennonite-born artists in the United States may be the metaphorical “canaries” in the Mennonite mines, as were perhaps the Mennonite-born artists of the Dutch Golden Age, like poet Joost van den Vondel and landscape painter Samuel van Hoogstraten. Vondel, Hoogstraten and many of their peers pointed the way to the eventual assimilation

Bruderhof Childhood in Paraguay, Europe and the USA, Belinda Manley's *Through Streets Broad and Narrow*, Nadine Moonje Pleil's *Free From Bondage*, and Miriam Arnold Holmes' *Cast Out Into the World*. The Peregrine Foundation has also republished Benjamin Zablocki's sociological study of the Bruderhof, *The Joyful Community*, originally published in 1980 by the University of Chicago.

¹² Sixty-four percent were raised Mennonites and never left their church and two percent are new believers (Kanagy 54).

¹³ Outside the modern stream, the semi-cloistered Old Order Mennonite, Amish and Hutterite branches of Anabaptism—none attached to the Mennonite Church USA—are growing in numbers, but that phenomenon is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

of the Mennonite church-communities in which they spent their formative years, communities that these artists left behind as adults.¹⁴

To understand what the modern Mennonite artists are giving up—and assimilating into—we need to understand the historical fate of small-town communities in the United States and how their erosion is linked to the rise of our prevailing economic system. The assault on communities is not just a Mennonite issue. It is a national, indeed global, issue. Mennonites are simply a particularly salient example of a larger phenomenon. This phenomenon is what we will explore in Part II, “On Community.”

¹⁴ Joost van den Vondel (1587-1679) was active in his parents’ Mennonite church until he was in his early 30s. By the time he was age 54, van den Vondel, his father and his daughter Anna were members of the Roman Catholic Church (van der Zijpp, “Vondel, Joost van den”). Samuel van Hoogstraten (1627-1678) was banned from his Dordrecht Mennonite congregation after he married a non-Mennonite. He then joined the Reformed Church. His son, book dealer Frans van Hoogstraten, became a Roman Catholic (van der Zijpp, “Hoogstraten, Dirk van”).

PART II. ON COMMUNITY

Chapter 3

Historical Look at Community in the U.S.

John Winthrop, a leader of the Puritans who settled in Massachusetts, set down these guidelines for behavior in a sermon preached in 1630, just before he and his fellow colonists stepped foot on American soil: “We must delight in each other, make others’ conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our community as members of the same body” (qtd. in Peck 26).

This pro-community sermon would have resonated with the first Mennonites who traveled from Europe to America 60 years after the Puritans. These Mennonites bore little trace of the blossoming of Renaissance Europe:

Central Europe was the heart of the noncommercial, nonindustrial feudal age. The commercial activities of the Roman Empire in the Mediterranean filtered only slowly from the seaports of Venice and Genoa northward across the Alps into Central Europe. . . . The South German Anabaptists in the cities were crushed and fled the mountainsides and into the rural valleys. The mountainous terrain promoted segregation and slowed communication and social interaction. The urban industrial complexes of, first, the Roman age in the Mediterranean, and later of the 16th century commerce and industry of northern Europe, never did influence this central part of continental Europe as deeply as they did other areas. It was out of this setting that the Swiss Mennonites, with a separatist, two-kingdom ethic, came largely to America, a few to Canada. (Kauffman and Driedger 30)

The “two kingdom ethic” refers to the traditional view of Mennonites that they are part of God’s kingdom, living out a covenant with God by actually seeking to practice what Christ preached and modeled, while the rest of the world is part of a different kingdom, which lives by different (lesser) standards. To keep from being contaminated by the ungodly world,¹⁵ the majority of Mennonites sought to live separately—at least

¹⁵ “Any real community with the unbelieving world [is] impossible... [The Christian] must go to those who share his standards, and who are devoted to the same goal, who have the same Lord” (Bender, *Mennonite Conception* 31).

they did until World War II.¹⁶ “The separatists viewed the rural environment as securing less involvement with the secular and morally compromising world of commerce, industry, politics, and entertainment typical of the city” (Kauffman and Driedger 30). During their first few centuries on American soil, the Mennonites’ separatism may have mitigated against the erosion of community occurring among other Americans.

Tocqueville Highlights Individualism

Visiting the United States from France in early 1800s, Alexis de Tocqueville penned *Democracy in America*, in which he popularized the term “individualism” in reference to a trend he detected among Americans: “Individualism is a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself” (477). A weakness in the American democratic system, said Tocqueville, is the way its citizens think of “themselves in isolation and imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands. . . . Each man is forever thrown back on himself alone, and there is danger that he may be shut up in the solitude of his own heart” (478).

As portrayed by Tocqueville, America’s communal spirit (exemplified by John Winthrop and the early Puritans) was disappearing. Some theological historians blame Protestantism for unleashing what became “unaccountable individuality” among its followers.¹⁷ In advocating for congregationally based worship during the Reformation, the Protestants were opposed to what was then the status quo—state-supported, hierarchically dominated religious systems. The Protestants did not intend to position themselves as “lonely rebels” against these systems, but rather to offer this option:

¹⁶ “Following World War II, as we became increasingly acculturated, our professionals and business community moved rather boldly into secular circles. There is great risk in this action, and it is not clear at this point in time what this will mean for our church. The only precedents for such identification with the surrounding worldly culture are the Dutch and North German Mennonite experiences” (Kraus, *Dreams* 17).

¹⁷ John Howard Yoder says that one of the criticisms that Catholic thinkers made of Protestantism in its first couple of hundred years was of being “incorrigibly individualistic” and that the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century turned this reproach into a compliment. “Western intellectual history ever since has been a pendulum swinging between the collective and the individual” (*Priestly* 24)

“communities which are genuinely voluntary,” which affirm “individual dignity. . . without enshrining individualism” (Yoder, *Priestly* 24).

Whatever the Protestants’ original intentions, their spiritual descendants are decidedly weak in their commitment to community life. In America, they engage in church splitting and church shopping and even invent their own religions (Schlabach 24). “When churches happily grow by marketing themselves and when believers commit only in the way of consumers, we are in danger of trivializing even the legitimate impulse toward reform and discarding commitments almost as quickly as consumer items” (24).

Schlabach argues that “the courage that allowed a Martin Luther to stand on conscience has become, in our individualistic age, an all-too-cheap excuse to avoid the hard work of living together in community.” He wants modern Protestants (and presumably Anabaptists too) “to relearn certain virtues that all Christian communities need to sustain their communal lives” (14).

Tocqueville spoke about the restlessness of America’s citizens in the 1800s, one sign of Americans’ disinclination to commit their energies to a particular community:

An American will build a house in which to pass his old age and sell it before the roof is on; he will plant a garden and rent it just as the trees are coming into bearing; he will clear a field and leave others to reap the harvest; he will take up a profession and leave it, settle in one place and soon go off elsewhere with his changing desires. If his private business allows him a moment's relaxation, he will plunge at once into the whirlpool of politics. Then, if at the end of a year crammed with work, he has a little spare leisure, his restless curiosity goes with him traveling up and down the vast territories of the United States. (508)

Behind the façade that Americans were enjoying considerable individual freedom, Tocqueville detected a strong push for conformity, which he called “the irresistible power of a people, which by ostracism and neglect, can impose a silence upon nonconformists more effective than any ‘auto-da-fé’ [i.e., outright repression]” (lxv). As a case in point, he talked about the angry reaction of Baltimore residents to a man who opposed the War of 1812. Certainly, Mennonites from Tocqueville’s era to this day have experienced such pressure to conform—to discard, for instance, their “plain clothing” (Ruth, *Mennonite* 54-55) and to join various war efforts or be treated as traitors or cowards (Burkholder 251).

Linking Individualism to Industrial Age

Broadening the views of Tocqueville and Western church historians, Leonard Jason links individualism to the advent of the Industrial Age. In his 1997 book *Community Building: Values for a Sustainable Future*, Jason sketches a history of humankind in which early hunters and gatherers were the ultimate individualists (12). As humans evolved into living in agricultural communities, Jason said they necessarily developed non-individualistic norms and behaviors to permit those communities to be viable.¹⁸

Jason links the resurrection of individualism to the replacement of agriculture-based economies with industrialized urban ones:

Prior to the Industrial Revolution [c. 1750 to c. 1850], people's roles in crafts and farming were well defined, and these jobs gave meaning to their lives. Since the Industrial Revolution, there has been a greater emphasis on the individual, and the prevalent values have become more materialistic and self-oriented. As more people have moved from the village to the city, long-term bonds with the land have been severed, and community traditions have weakened. (20)

The authors of *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (1996), a much-referenced compendium by four sociologists and one scholar of religion, support Jason's broad view of the economic basis of the shift from close-knit farm communities to atomistic humans functioning in modern society:

The most distinctive aspect of twentieth-century American society is the division of life into a number of separate functional sectors: home and workplace, work and leisure, white collar and blue collar, public and private. This division suited the needs of the bureaucratic industrial corporations that provided the model for our preferred means of organizing society.... All this is in strong contrast to the widespread nineteenth-century pattern in which, as on the often-sentimentalized family farm, these functions had only indistinct boundaries. (Bellah et al. 43)

Sociologist Robert Putman—whose bestselling book *Bowling Alone* builds on *Habits of the Heart* published four years earlier—pushes forward the date of the disintegration of Americans' sense of community to the last third of the twentieth

¹⁸ Such norms are apparent in our agricultural-era Bible.

century, which is more than 100 years beyond the appearance of urbanization and industrialization that Jason speaks about. Putnam's time frame, however, does coincide with the widespread replacement of small businesses with giant impersonal corporations and the almost total disappearance of the family farm in North America:

For the first two-thirds of the twentieth century a powerful tide bore Americans into ever deeper engagement in the life of their communities, but a few decades ago—silently, without warning—that tide reversed and we were overtaken by a treacherous rip current. Without at first noticing, we have been pulled apart from one another and from our communities over the last third of the century. (Putman 27)

Similar Shift Across Cultures

The *International Handbook of Creativity*, a 2006 book that compared the way that creativity is viewed in a half-dozen different cultures, contains a chapter that discusses the way schoolteachers in India have altered their opinions since the 1970s on which creative traits are most desirable in their students. The changed views seem to reflect a shift in India from rural-communalism to urban-individualism. In the 1970s and 1980s, Indian schoolteachers sounded a lot like traditional Mennonites in favoring these attributes: obedience, courteousness, affection, doing work on time, being considerate of others, and being altruistic (Misra et al. 439). When surveyed in 2002, Indian schoolteachers wanted their students to exhibit these traits: courage, curiosity, independence in thinking, and persistence (439).

Jason hypothesizes that in the future we will return to favoring communal-based norms and behaviors; this will be necessary, he says, for continued survival in this interdependent world. If so, any remaining agrarian-rooted social and religious groups may be able to offer lessons—or an adaptable model—on how to live in community. Such groups would include peoples from peasant communities in the so-called developing world, indigenous peoples everywhere, and rural communities that have escaped the homogenizing influence of globalization. It could also include Mennonites, the majority of whom are at most one or two generations removed from farming communities.¹⁹

¹⁹ In the 50 years from the era of WWII until 1989, Mennonites in the U.S. shifted from being 90 percent living on farms (Driedger 114) to only 7 percent working the land (58). By 1989, 28 percent had professions, 9 percent were in business, and 11 percent held sales or clerical jobs (58). These statistics,

Preserved by Separatism

Viewed through this lens, farm-rooted Mennonites are less a religious phenomenon than a social anachronism in the post-industrial age. Their persecution centuries ago and subsequent withdrawal into relatively self-contained rural communities—with the notable exceptions of the Mennonites in the Netherlands, Germany, Prussia and the Ukraine—caused a later shift from community living to individualism. (The “Old Order Mennonites” and other very conservative Anabaptist church-communities groups have declined to make the shift to this day.)

Traditional Mennonite communities continue to exemplify these qualities: denial of individual interests in favor of the collectivity, emphasis on the family, biblical and communal authority (or, more broadly, group-determined moral authority and spiritual values), and group separatism (Kniss 6).²⁰ In *Unlearning Protestantism: Sustaining Christian Community in an Unstable Age*, a Roman Catholic theologian of Mennonite origins, Gerald W. Schlabach, compared the traditional Mennonite model “with its concomitant pattern of authority, obedience, and measured openings for loyal dissent,” with that of the Rule of St. Benedictine, followed by Benedictine monks since the sixth century (99). The monks needed “a little strictness in order to amend faults and to safeguard love,” said Benedict, for “the good of all concerned” (qtd. in Schlabach 99).

Mennonite sociologist Calvin Redekop borrows the terms *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* from Ferdinand Tonnies’ book *Community and Society* (1957) to explain the differences between pre-industrial and post-industrial social relationships. Though *Gemeinschaft* is often translated as “community,” Redekop likens *Gemeinschaft* to

however, may mislead one into thinking that Mennonites suddenly became city folk—actually ties to the land remained strong into the twenty-first century: In 2006, when 38 percent of Mennonites held college degrees, 40 percent of all Mennonites had grown up on a farm, though most were no longer supporting themselves with farming (Kanagy 58-60).

²⁰ In contrast to this traditional separatism, sociologist Fred Kniss describes a progressive, post-WWII current within the Mennonite church—he dubbed it “communalism”—where “the primary moral project is the community [and] the maximization of the public good.” The goal is a just and peaceful world, and the means are “concern for egalitarianism, social justice, pacifism, stewardship of the environment, mutual aid, and a focus on [local] religious congregations as primary communities for their members [rather than broader church structures, with overseeing church elders]” (6).

familial relationships, as opposed to relationships based on the usefulness of one to the other (*Gesellschaft*).

The *Gesellschaft* relationship is based on rationality and calculation. All activities and relationships are restricted to a definite means of achieving them. *Gesellschaft* is fostered in the modern economic enterprise. The city nurtures *Gesellschaft*, whereas rural areas tend to support *Gemeinschaft* relationships. The *Gemeinschaft* relationship is based on common spirit, mind, beliefs, and goals. The *Gesellschaft* relationship, however, depends upon the basic heterogeneity in all things except the one factor which produces the relationship, such as the exchange of desired products. (*Mennonite* 129)

Those Mennonites who no longer want to live in insular rural communities, who want to be part of the modern world, face clear dilemmas. Is it possible to form non-rural, modern communities of shared Mennonite ethics and practices that differ from those relationships designed to support “exchange of desired products” and “the modern economic enterprise”? Can modern Mennonites buck the appeal and utility of individualism, and commit to fostering spirit-guided community? Can they resist the homogenizing sweep of global industrialization?

In a 1986 conference in Canada on Mennonite identity, scholar Hans-Jürgen Goertz answered these questions pessimistically. He decried the acquiescence of modern Mennonites to the “competitive egoism” necessary for capitalist economic development (10). “The Mennonites have made their accommodation with bourgeois, capitalist society” (11), he wrote in *Mennonite Identity*, a 1988 book derived from that conference. Worse, Goertz said, Mennonites have “availed themselves of the opportunity to participate and profit from this system, without noticing the extent to which they have thereby come into contradiction to their confessional heritage” of a fraternal social order (11). Yet after a litany of unflattering observations about the “toothless” Mennonites of the 1980s, Goertz expressed hope for “a revitalization of [their] confessional heritage” (6) through applying the “vitality of the Gospel” to “the social experiences of the present day” (11).

Chapter 4

Defining Community

We have been speaking of “community” without defining it. In *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (1985), Anthony P. Cohen refers to an American sociologist in the 1950s who found more than 90 definitions of community within the social sciences, including people living in the same geographical location, or functioning together in institutions such as the military or workplace, or having a common ethnic heritage. Obviously, if the word “community” is to have any meaning in this paper, we must whittle it down from dozens of possible interpretations.

What Community Is *Not*

Let us begin with what community is *not* in the context of this discussion. *The Different Drum: Community-Making and Peace*, a 1987 book by psychiatrist M. Scott Peck, contains numerous examples of what could be called transitory “lifestyle groups” rather than viable communities. He advises his readers “start your own community” in order to have “a community to empower you” as you “undertake concerted social action on behalf of peace” (326). Any Mennonite who has worked seriously on behalf of peace—wrestling with internal and external pressures, despite the benefit of centuries of established pacifist tradition, firmly anchored in a commonly held theology—will smile at the naiveté of Peck’s call to found one’s “own” community. The phraseology itself is individualistic and self-centered. Why doesn’t Peck ask readers to work within the community where they now find themselves or to adhere to a long-standing community of workers for peace? He acts as if such communities do not exist and must be somehow launched from scratch, advising: “Start one in your church. Start one in your school. Start one in your neighborhood (326).”

Lest one feel intimidated by the proposition of launching one’s own community, Peck explains that it can be done in just two days, or even faster!

In my experience two days provide just the right amount of time for a group of thirty to sixty to become a true community. It is possible to do it more rapidly. Genuine community of sorts can usually be established in a few hours when the group is instructed from the outset to refrain from generalizations, to speak personally, to be vulnerable, to avoid attempting

to heal or convert, to empty itself, to listen wholeheartedly, and to embrace the painful as well as the pleasant. (128)

David Brubaker, a professor at Eastern Mennonite University who has worked with organizational relationships for 25 years, says he has never known a true community to be formed in 48 hours. If there are painful issues to process, conflicts to work out, then the time commitment required is extensive, typically six to nine months to sort out matters and arrive at group harmony, says Brubaker (personal communication to Lofton).

None of the community-focused sociologists cited in this dissertation would agree with Peck that a viable community can be formed from a group of people who simply decide to join together and call themselves a community. Peck especially diverges from sociologists in asserting that community can be formed by a *mélange* of people who individually believe whatever they wish to believe, no matter how different from each other. Somehow, in Peck's view, they will transcend their differences through the exercise of open communication and thus form community:

Community is integrative. It includes people of different sexes, ages, religions, cultures, viewpoints, life styles, and stages of development by integrating them into a whole that is greater—better—than the sum of its parts. Integration is not a melting process; it does not result in a bland average. Rather, it has been compared to the creation of a salad in which the identity of the individual ingredients is preserved yet simultaneously transcended. Community does not solve the problem of pluralism by obliterating diversity. Instead it seeks out diversity, welcomes other points of view, embraces opposites, desires to see the other side of every issue. It is “wholistic.” It integrates us human beings into a functioning mystical body. (234)

Peck does allow that “pseudocommunity is conflict-avoiding; true community is conflict-resolving” (88), but he does not explain how a community can resolve conflict with no deeply rooted and commonly held reference points. If, for example, you believe that Armageddon is imminent and that nothing humans can do will change this fact, then your approach to conserving the environment will be vastly different from someone who thinks that humans need to strive to keep the planet habitable for future generations. If a social-action group is divided evenly between those who hold one view on Armageddon and those who hold the opposing view, it is not likely to be a viable community of activists, regardless of how open the communication.

Communities Evolve Over Time

Henry Rempel, a pastor at Mennonite-run Bluffton College in the 1960s, reflected in a 1966 issue of the journal *Concern* on the failure of a year-long experiment at Bluffton for a loose church-fellowship to function as a “redemptive community.” The fellowship met once a week. Rempel attributed the failure to the students’ inability to develop trust in each other in the limited time that they had together. He also bemoaned the inability for the group to make decisions given members’ widely disparate views (64).

A Mennonite writer-editor, Ann Hostetler, has suggested that poets and writers might be able to develop a new form of Mennonite community, one that is “virtual,” centered around “relationship and connection” rather than “notions of history and place” (238). “Perhaps the virtual community of Mennonite literature is not just a move away from the land, a gesture toward assimilation into a culture modeled on cyberspace,” she said, “but can also serve as a palimpsestic network that enables its members to retain a sense of Mennonite identity and community in strange new lands” (239). Hostetler’s vision of community resembles Peck’s in being based on a sense of connection that assumedly requires no change or conformity on the part of the participant, little or no shared life experiences or history, and no common belief system—in short, her community would be based on feelings and connections likely to be transitory.

Commitment Required

On one point, Peck is more realistic than Hostetler. He recognizes the need for *commitment*: “There must be a high degree of commitment to community for a group to become a community in the first place and *there must be a committed nucleus* for any community to maintain itself” (158, emphasis added).

The Church likes to refer to itself as the “Body of Christ.” But it behaves as if it thought it could be the Body of Christ painlessly, as if it could be the Body without having to be stretched, almost torn apart. . . . The process of community-building begins with a commitment—a commitment of the members not to drop out, a commitment to hang in there through thick and thin, through the pain of chaos and emptiness. Such commitment has not generally been required by the Church. Now the time has come to require it. For without that commitment community is impossible. (300)

In other passages, Peck likens this commitment to that required for lasting marriages: “If you conclude under your breath, ‘Well, —this group just isn’t for me— they’re too much this or too much that—and I’m just going to quietly pick up my marbles and go home,’ it would be as destructive to community as it would be to a marriage were you to conclude, ‘Well, the grass looks a little greener on the other side of the fence, and I’m just going to move on’” (62). In other words, “community, like marriage, requires that we hang in there when the going gets a little tough” (62).

Sociologists agree with Peck on the vital role of commitment in building and maintaining community. In *The Sociological Tradition*, Robert Nisbet defined community as that which “encompasses all forms of relationship which are characterized by a high degree of personal intimacy, emotional depth, moral commitment, social cohesion, and continuity in time” (qtd. in Redekop, *Mennonite* 129). Describing what they call “social ecology” or “moral ecology,” Bellah and his co-authors speak of “the web of understandings and commitments that tie people together in community” (335).

Schlabach uses a different word—*fidelity*—but it plays the same role of keeping a community, or a marriage, glued together through hard times: “Let me offer an irreverent definition: whatever else fidelity may be, on an ordinary day in ordinary parishes, colleges, marriages, religious communities, and so on, fidelity is the virtue that keeps us together even when we’re pissed off at each other” (45).

Overlapping Interactions

John Howard Yoder, the best-known and most prolific of modern Mennonite theologians, argues that such commitment, such fidelity, can only result from regular, overlapping interactions of long duration—that is, the kind of interactions lacking in the 1960s-era experiment at launching a new church-fellowship at Bluffton College. “Only when people live together in the same city, meet together often, and know each other well, can this ‘bearing of one another’s burdens’ be carried out in a fully loving way,” wrote Yoder in a 1967 article in *Concern* (31).

Drawing on his knowledge of the Catholic church, sociologist Philip Selznick said: “The more pathways are provided for participation in diverse ways and touching multiple interests—for example, worshiping in Catholic churches, attending Catholic schools, contributing to Catholic charities, reading the Catholic press—the richer is the

experience of community” (359).²¹ In sum, “a group is a community to the extent that it encompasses a broad range of activities and interests, and to the extent that participation implicates whole persons rather than segmental interests or activities” (358). By this definition, we do not experience true community in our separated workplaces, professional associations, sports teams, civic societies, clubs of fellow hobbyists, and even faith-based institutions, *unless these relationships overlap with each other in some way*.

Anthony Cohen, the sociologist who referred to 90 definitions of community, warned against trying to define community in a structural way—as those living in a geographic location or as a group of people gathered under the name of, say, a society or an association. Community is actually a symbolic construct, he says, existing “in the minds of its members” and not in any objective criteria (98). The mental aspect of community—the sense of mutual belonging, support and obligation—grows not only from overlapping experiences and relationships, but from common history and culture—all of which give rise to shared principles:

The bonds of community are strongest when they are fashioned from strands of shared history and culture.²² They are weak and precarious when they must depend on very general interests or abstract ideas. Furthermore, the character of a community largely reflects the particularities of custom, language, and institutional life; a heritage of significant events and crises; and such historically determined attributes as size, geography, and demography. . . . Rootedness and belonging make for individual well-being as well as commitment to others, and a sense of history is needed for sound collective judgment as to means and ends. The quest is for principles latent in the community’s culture and history. . . . Such principles become resources for internal dialogue. (Selznick 361)

²¹ In *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam cited studies showing that the traditional effectiveness of Catholic schools was due to “the social structure enveloping the school,” with two parents providing a stable family base and having relations with other parents and the larger church community, as well as with the school (304). These schools were generally smaller and were “characterized by a high level of internal agreement about the school’s mission and values” (302-303). This effectiveness is eroding, Putnam added.

²² The Mennonite Church USA has distanced itself in recent decades from its Swiss-German-Russian ethnic roots in order to be more “inclusive” of members and visitors who have different roots. Sociologically, Selznick would view this as a mistake, in that it discards certain “particularities” that have helped to sustain this church-community over many centuries.

The foregoing quote bears reiterating—it contains so many key ideas about community: the importance of shared “particularities”; of experiencing and emerging from crises; of commitment; of “a sense of history” for determining the best future course of action; and of shared principles to guide internal debate. All of these qualities can still be claimed by both traditional and modern Mennonite communities, though (as we shall see later in this paper) erosion is occurring among the modern ones.

Boundaries

In emphasizing what members of a community have in common with each other, sociologists also recognize that these commonalities must distinguish community members in a significant way from non-members (Cohen 12). “‘Community’ thus seems to imply simultaneously both similarity and difference,” says Cohen. “The word thus expresses a *relational* idea: the opposition of one community to others or to other social entities. . . . By definition, the boundary marks the beginning and end of a community” (12).

So, in contrast with Peck’s nebulous definition of community (“Y’all come—we’ll work it out somehow, as long as we hang in with each other!”), communities need boundaries. “Why is such marking necessary? The simple answer is that the boundary encapsulates the identity of the community and, like the identity of an individual, is called into being by the exigencies of social interaction” (Cohen 12).

Role of Symbols and Rituals

Mark K. Smith, author of the “Community” entry for the online *Encyclopedia of Informal Education*, notes that all religions are centered on belonging to community or, put another way, being in communion with each other. The signs of belonging—the boundary markers—are partly established by the symbols and rituals employed by each religious community, writes Smith.

Cohen makes the surprising assertion that belonging to a community requires subscribing to its symbols and rituals, but *not necessarily agreeing on the meaning attached to those symbols and rituals*. In fact, Cohen argues that communities manage to strike a healthy balance between individual differences and community conformity precisely by not demanding that everyone agree on what everything actually means.

Symbols are effective because they are imprecise. Though obviously not contentless, part of their meaning is “subjective”. They are, therefore, ideal media through which people can speak a “common” language, behave in apparently similar ways, participate in the “same” rituals, pray to the “same” gods, wear similar clothes, and so forth, without subordinating themselves to a tyranny of orthodoxy. Individuality and thus commonality are thus reconcilable. Just as the “common form” of the symbol aggregates the various meanings assigned to it, so the symbolic repertoire of a community aggregates the individualities and other differences found within the community and provides the means for their expression, interpretation and containment. It provides the range within which individuality is recognizable. It continuously transforms the reality of difference into the appearance of similarity with such efficacy that people can still invest the “community” with ideological integrity. It unites them in their opposition, both to each other, and to those “outside”. It thereby constitutes, and gives reality to the community's boundaries. (21)

Cohen says that members of a community usually share common ways of behaving (“a commonality of forms”), but they typically ascribe different meanings to those forms. “The triumph of community is to so contain this variety [of ideas] that its inherent discordance does not subvert the apparent coherence which is expressed by its boundaries” (20).

Shared Moral Order

Many scholars reflecting on the wave of “hippy communes” in the 1960s—and their subsequent demise—and on the high failure rate of utopian communities in U.S. history,²³ have concluded that enduring communities necessarily have a “system of values, norms, and moral codes which provides a sense of identity within abounded whole to its members” (Cohen 9). Such meaning cannot be easily developed—just setting up a structure won’t suffice—which is why communities formed simply to overcome social alienation or economic marginalization do not last (9). Shared moral order and culture is essential (Vaisey 851). Almost all the communes lasting more than ten years have had a religious character (Fretz 14).

²³ Commenting in 1983 on intentional communities that came and went in the 60s and 70s, J. Winfield Fretz noted that “most of those with non-religious motivations vanished. Communes with secular bases like social experimentation, economic idealism and strictly humanitarian motivation have had very little staying power” (13). For historical examples, the *Dictionary of American Communal and Utopian History* includes these: the Amana Colonies in Iowa (1855 to mid-1930s); the three “Harmony Society” communities in Pennsylvania and Indiana (1805 to 1903); the Oneida Colony in New York (circa 1848 to 1881); and the Shakers in New York and New England (1774 to circa 1846).

Communal Memory

The authors of *Habits of the Heart* say that even if a communal group makes it past the 10-year mark, it isn't necessarily a community—not until it lasts long enough to embody communal memory, containing stories of both suffering and of success:

Communities, in the sense in which we are using the term, have a history—in an important sense they are constituted by their past—and for this reason we can speak of a real community as a “community of memory,” one that does not forget its past. In order not to forget that past, a community is involved in retelling its story, its constitutive narrative, and in so doing, it offers examples of the men and women who have embodied and exemplified the meaning of the community. These stories of collective history and exemplary individuals are an important part of the tradition that is so central to a community of memory.²⁴

. . . A genuine community of memory will also tell painful stories of shared suffering that sometimes creates deeper identities than success. . . . And if the community is completely honest, it will remember stories not only of suffering received but of suffering inflicted—dangerous memories, for they call the community to alter ancient evils.²⁵ The communities of memory that tie us to the past also turn us toward the future as communities of hope. They carry a context of meaning that can allow us to connect our aspirations for ourselves and those closest to us with the aspirations of a larger whole and see our own efforts as being, in part, contributions to a common good. (Bellah et al. 153)

Thus far, we have considered how viable communities require the following: time to evolve; a committed nucleus; members' commitment to the community; religious purpose and character; symbols and rituals that reflect this religious purpose; overlapping experiences and relationships; common historical and cultural reference points; and clarity about boundaries (that is, who is part of the community, who isn't, and the differences between the two).

Whither Virtues?

In *Has Modernism Failed?* (1984), Suzi Gablik critiqued the modern art world for losing its moorings. She attributed its floundering to the modern fad of rejecting both “a shared conception of the communal good” and “certain virtues which impose restraints and provide a conception of excellence” (120). Though her polemic was aimed at visual

²⁴ This is the role played by the *Martyrs' Mirror* for the Mennonites.

²⁵ For example, Mennonite historians often cite Melchior Hoffman's disastrous call in the early 1500s for Mennonites to take up arms.

artists of the late twentieth century, her discussion on the importance of virtues is relevant to a consideration of the characteristics of viable communities.

Agreeing upon key virtues and cultivating them in ourselves is essential to functioning as higher beings, according to philosophers as diverse as Plato and the compilers of the New Testament. Plato emphasized temperance, prudence, courage and justice. In 2 Peter 1:5, we find similar emphases, but they are offered as stepping stones to the ultimate virtue of expressing love: “Make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love” (*RSV*). In two other biblical passages—1 Corinthians 13:13 and Galatians 5:22-23—faith, hope, love, joy, patience, kindness, gentleness and self-control are included as “fruits of the spirit.” Gablik wonders why it has gone out of fashion to understand that living in harmony with each other requires a combination of commitment *and* self-discipline. In short, it requires embracing and practicing virtues:

Modern society views discipline as a form of constraint submitted to grudgingly, but certain aspects of the moral character can be achieved only through the exercise of virtues that exist independently of each individual, and cannot be altered according to taste. The imperative quality of the rule lies precisely in the fact that it is binding—the element of choice is taken out. It requires us to act in a certain way simply because it is good to do so. Virtues are the necessary instruments which help to keep a balance between stasis and change, conservation and innovation, morality and self-interest—and which provide us with a sense of limits. It is this balance which our culture seems fatally to have lost. (120-121)

Gablik notes that a vice named by Aristotle—*acquisitiveness* to the point of garnering more than one's fair share—is far from being viewed as a vice in the modern world; it is now celebrated as the “driving force of modern productive work.” By contrast, the cultivation of Aristotle's virtues of *truthfulness* and *moderation* seem quaintly unrealistic, blocking one's path to becoming rich, famous and powerful (121).

Later in this paper, when we explore the results of my survey of modern Mennonite artists and compare their views on freedom and community to those of other artists, both in history and cross-culturally, we will delve further into Gablik's insights.

Social Capital

A sign that a community is indeed a true community is the existence of what Robert Putnam calls “social capital”—that is, a social network based on trust and norms of reciprocity.²⁶ “A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital” (Putnam 19). Summarizing what he calls a half century of research into what makes life satisfying, Putnam says “happiness is best predicted by the breadth and depth of one’s social connections” (332).

One could argue that successful business persons necessarily develop a wealth of social connections, so “social capital” can be accrued outside of being part of a community. Yet the utilitarian nature of social connections made primarily for business purposes renders hollow the trust that Putnam considers essential for social capital. Americans may be “networking” more these days—with the help of Facebook and other online social networks like LinkedIn—but Putnam thinks most of us have little social capital:

[In recent decades] life satisfaction among adult Americans has declined steadily. Roughly half the decline in contentment is associated with financial worries, and half is associated with declines in social capital: lower marriage rates and decreasing connectedness to friends and community [especially among those aged 20 to 55]. . . . Psychologist Martin Seligman argues that more of us are feeling down because modern society encourages a belief in personal control and autonomy more than a commitment to duty and common enterprise. This transformation heightens our expectations about what we can achieve through choice and grit and leaves us unprepared to deal with life’s inevitable failures. Where once we could fall back on social capital—families, churches, friends—these no longer are strong enough to cushion our fall. In our personal as well as in our collective life, the evidence of this chapter suggests, we are paying a significant price for a quarter century’s disengagement from one another. (334-335)

Putnam also speaks of the downside of social capital—it can be oppressive if it is not leavened with tolerance of diversity and sympathetic understanding of difference. “Negative manifestations” of social capital include “sectarianism, ethnocentrism and corruption” (22).

²⁶ Sue Johnson says the term “social capital” was coined in 1916 by a Virginia educator (14). Regardless, Putnam certainly popularized the term.

Writing from a biblical perspective 35 years before the appearance of Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone*, Mennonite theologian C. Norman Kraus said: "Man's individuality and freedom find their fruition and fulfillment in the community of love. . . . The self is formed in community, and man is dependent upon continuing mutual relationships to maintain his identity and find self-fulfillment. . . . Without love increased knowledge and power can result only in the intensification of bondage, depersonalization, and loneliness (Kraus, *Outside* 15).

Mention of love brings us back to the virtues. Love is not just a feeling; it requires making the choice to act in a loving way. As the famous Pauline quotation in 1 Corinthians 13 puts it:

Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things (*RSV*).

Nobody has ever claimed that working to achieve Paul's standards for love is easy. Spiritual fortitude and discipline (internal and external) are necessary to practice "patience, tolerance, forgiveness, and the suppression of one's own ego for the good of the whole" (Fretz 14).

This leads us to next consider the kind of communities that Mennonites have sought to form and sustain since the 1500s.

Chapter 5

The Model Offered by Anabaptist Communities

The way early Christians suffered under, and coped with, Roman totalitarianism would be familiar to many people in developing countries today. The Christians lived at the subsistence level, burdened with high taxes to pay for military occupation and for luxurious living for the segment of their society that served Roman rule. They survived by living in what sociologists call “kin-groups” and practicing “generalized reciprocity”—that is, sharing possessions and workloads in large, extended families, taking care of each other, and melding each person’s identity to that of the group (Finger 267).

When early Anabaptists looked back at the early church—and considered how they should behave if they took the Sermon on the Mount seriously in daily life—they saw simple lifestyles in close, supportive communities of believers. Their closest spiritual cousins were members of certain Catholic monastic orders who lived ascetically while being of service whenever possible. Though they were lay people, the Anabaptists shared the orientation of these monks and nuns toward nonviolence, communal living, obedience to what they viewed as a higher calling, and independence of the church from secular control (Klaassen, *Anabaptism* 72).

Rather than putting their energies into the existing order which was built on violence and coercion they set about to actualize in the midst of the old system a new order in which the old rules of coercive power no longer applied. This took the form of a caring, loving, forgiving, disciplined community in which each member found the fulfillment of his own individuality and made his uniquely individual contribution to the strength and vitality of the whole. (75)

As in the case of the women portrayed in the New Testament, early Anabaptist women made their own choices about whether to conform to the accepted religious practices of their home districts or to join this break-away minority faith movement. No person was coerced into being an Anabaptist, and in the earliest decades, most suffered extremely for their choice. The leadership was lay and unpaid, emerging organically from the ranks of the believers. In short, this was a radically different approach to Christianity compared to the hierarchical, masculine Catholic and Protestant models.

The biblical injunction to be non-conformed to the world made sense to them—the Anabaptists were forced to the margins and they eventually chose to remain on the margins in order to be able to practice their beliefs as they saw fit. “This was nonconformity in its best light: empowered by the grace of God and molded after the pattern of Christ, the Christian community lived as a ‘light set upon a hill’ according to principles—which were in stark contrast to the world around,” said John D. Roth in “Let’s Reclaim Nonconformity” (15).

As non-conformists—and as people who distained wealth and sympathized with those who suffered—Anabaptists were viewed as opponents of the status quo, as social revolutionaries. This is why the early idealistic Marxists viewed this particular group of Christians as praiseworthy, “because they [the Anabaptists] believed in the integration of theory and practice and sought a more just social order” (A. Friesen 84).

For better and for worse, “nonconformity to the world” evolved into a central principle, resulting in a sharply dualistic approach to life. “All of life was a cosmic battle between the forces of good and the forces of evil,” wrote John D. Roth, adding:

True Christians recognized the battlelines and joined the fray by bearing witness to the spirit of goodness, peace, love and truth in the simple acts of everyday living. Indeed, simplicity among the Anabaptists quickly became a consistent and characteristic expression of their commitment to a life of nonconformity. Simplicity in deed (“acts of quiet charity and humble sacrifice”), in speech (“let your yea be yea”), in dress (“tailors and seamstresses shall hold to the plain and simple costume and shall make nothing at all for pride’s sake”), in church architecture (“they secretly meet in homes and caves”), and in their interpretation of Scripture (“love your enemies, do good to those who persecute you”) all bore witness to their stubborn refusal to conform to the mold of the larger society. (15)

Since the Bible did not contain a dress code, what was a “plain and simple costume”? Did simple living spell “no jewelry”? Did the hard work necessary to survive preempt feeling enjoyment by, say, dancing or taking time to paint a picture? The contemporary expression “the devil is in the details” certainly applied to the early Anabaptists. Decisions about what was acceptable had to be made. Then, what to do with the church members who continued on an unacceptable path? What about those who persisted, for instance, in spending money on frivolous or even harmful pursuits, while fellow believers were suffering in poverty?

In the early 1500s, at least one Anabaptist leader in south Germany, Pilgram Marpeck, expressed concern about his group's over-reaction to temporary lapses, about not allowing room for growth in Christian discipleship. He noted that new followers may not be able to change old habits all at once: "patience with what appears to be error is the ark in which all the treasures of God's grace are stored" (qtd. in Klaassen, *Anabaptism* 32). Marpeck felt "the ban"—enforcement by social shunning, used to this day among the Amish and Old Order Mennonites—should only be used in extreme cases. Marpeck's plea for tolerance and patience (and fear of the dangers of group coercion) was sidelined in Anabaptist history, until similar views emerged among the modern Mennonites of the last two centuries.

Living in groups separated from surrounding society came to be viewed as a condition for being saved when Jesus Christ returned to earth—an event believed to be imminent. Writing in 1935, J. A. Heiser and D.A. Yoder explained:

It is not a question whether we want to be separate, but it is a fact. If we are not, we are none of His. When our Lord returns there will be a separation as one shall be taken and another left. At the judgment some will be on the one side and others on the other and through the ages of eternity some will be in heaven with God and others will be in the place of eternal torment. (38)

For those in the presumably chosen Anabaptist group, some of the "rules" that evolved were: no prideful wearing of jewelry or of gold in any form (Erb 27); limited music (Conrad Grebel was opposed to even singing, but his view did not carry the day—only instrumental and secular music were banned) (W. Klassen 51); no divorce, except for a woman's adultery, and remarriage forbidden while the former spouse lived (Erb 27); no profane entertainment or other pleasures of the flesh, including enjoyment of fun but useless artifacts (Ruth, *Mennonite* 38).

These guidelines can be traced in part to 1 Peter 3:1-4, which also partly explains the sidelining of Anabaptist women from leadership positions until very recently:

[Y]ou wives, be submissive to your husbands, so that some, though they do not obey the word, may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives when they see your reverent and chaste behavior. Let not yours be the outward adorning with braiding of hair, decoration of gold, and wearing of robes, but let it be the hidden person of the heart with the

imperishable jewel of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious. (RVS)

Whether following these ascetic precepts was *freeing* or *oppressive* depends on which Anabaptist you listen to and the era that he or she is talking about.

Beauty of an Insular Community

For the “freeing” point of view, we turn to an interview with Amos Hoover, a member of an Old Order Mennonite group in Pennsylvania today.²⁷ Hoover’s group—indeed all Old Order groups—decline to use electricity, drive automobiles, or pursue education beyond grade eight. The Old Order women wear dresses of similar modest design and “prayer coverings” over a portion of their uncut hair, drawn back in a bun. The men wear “plain clothes” of a cut that harkens back to a century ago and clearly distinguishes them from men in contemporary clothing. There is relatively little variation among the attire worn by members of a particular group—it is supposed to, and does, look as uniform as that worn by today’s hospital nurses. Hoover was interviewed by Joe Miller, a modern Mennonite, and the resulting essay appeared under the title “The Peculiar Beauty of *Gelassenheit*: An Interview with Amos B. Hoover” in *The Measure of My Days: Engaging the Life and Thought of John L. Ruth*.

Hoover made it clear to Miller that he had sometimes backed initiatives that were resisted by his Mennonite church-community, such as working on a newsletter and a Bible study group. But he also pointed out that sometimes the Old Order resisters-to-change came around, if he and others advocating a change were patient and understanding. And even if they didn’t, the beauty of the group’s functioning and unity was worth yielding on matters where agreement could not be reached.

I will quote Hoover at length in the following excerpts, because the feelings and meaning he conveys cannot be easily distilled to a 50-word summary.

- I know it is difficult for the average North American to understand, but within the Old Order community we endeavor to place a higher value on the whole community than we do on the individual. *The community is what is beautiful and sacred*, not the individual. That is almost impossible for the average American person to grasp, let alone appreciate. *To find other expressions of*

²⁷ Though this dissertation does not encompass the Old Order group, except peripherally, Amos Hoover’s frozen-in-the-past lifestyle seems likely to reflect some of the attributes of conformity experienced by the majority Mennonites from the 1600s through the 1800s.

this way of living, I am guessing that you would need to look to other cultures outside of North America. (215, emphasis added)

- We are cared about and cared for, and we get to care about and for others within the Old Order community. This deep, deep sense of mutual care and concern feels wonderful and for me is beautiful. To outsiders, ours is a strange and peculiar beauty not easily understood or seen by non-Old Order people. (221)
- We have agreed to dress more or less alike and to dress plainly, as a way to express our desire for simplicity, and to celebrate our unity. So it is the truth that for me, beauty is people who do not crowd the boundary lines—like the size of a woman’s prayer covering, for example, or the cut of a man’s coat. (217)
- Old Order people have identified themselves as a “strange and peculiar people.” I think the Old Orders have a strange kind of beauty to share with the world. But like all real beauty, the deepest kind of beauty—a beauty that goes deeper than the surface—is always difficult to see and understand. It is the strange beauty of submission of the self to the faith community. (226-227)
- Perhaps we Old Orders have a calling to be a witness to modern American culture. Our message is that their loneliness and isolation is not the only path. Maybe there are some gentle ways we Old Order people might share, through how we live out the beauty of community—Christian community. (226-227)

Hoover spoke of his concern for the future of his children and grandchildren—if he had pursued a university education, his descendants might not be Mennonites. “That for me would be too high a price to pay. . . . I also think that our marriage would have been a very unhappy experience if we had taken that course. . . . Farm life certainly was the most ideal way for us to raise a family” (J. Miller 210).

Hoover confessed that he had hungered for further formal education and exposure to information via TV when he was a young man. In hindsight, he was thankful that his church community refused to allow TV to enter the community. Besides the nefarious content of much of TV, Hoover believed it to be addictive. In the absence of unnecessary and unhelpful worldly stimulation, he said he has received the gift of deep serenity (219). In contrast to the fellowship of his community, Hoover expressed “great sadness” for the “terrible loneliness in which I see those people living” in the world beyond his boundaries (215). In the way he characterized his community, Hoover could almost be describing a lay or familial version of monastery life, which also purports to yield

spiritual enrichment and inner peace for those who accept the discipline required to belong to a monastic order.

It is also possible that by limiting their sources of artistic stimulation, Old Order Mennonites may savor their exposure to beauty even more than those of us who are bombarded by music, art, fashion, and drama in some form every day. Here is how one Old Order farmer expressed his perception of beauty:

I don't see beauty in expensive goods. I see beauty in woodwork. Woodworking to me is building barns and putting up anything in the old-fashioned way. . . .

Why, I see beauty in these old timbers, all these old boards. I see beauty in each part of the barn here. I see beauty in the hay crop here and I even see beauty in the way the bales are stacked. . . .

I still regret some of the beauties you don't see anymore, like the sheaves of wheat and the straw stacked in front of the barn. . . .

Every hour of the day, there's beauty to think about, being close to nature on the family farm. (qtd. in Ruth, *Quiet* 44).

For some, however, such conformity and purposeful limiting of experiences would be suffocating. “The paradox is that separation can breed stagnation. . . . There is almost universal agreement among [modern] Mennonites that they have become increasingly ingrown, involuted, and static in their understanding of faith and life. . . .” writes Redekop in *Mennonite Society*. “Many who are alienated or leave the Mennonite tradition cite this factor as the most destructive of Mennonite health and prosperity” (298). Esther Royer Ayers provides such a case in point.

Oppressiveness of an Insular Community

In her 2005 memoir *Rolling Down Black Stockings—A Passage Out of the Old Order Mennonite Religion*, Esther Royer Ayers said the Old Order communities in which she spent her childhood confined “their members through fear and oppression and hobble them so that they can’t leave the religion” (171). Ayers had almost nothing positive to say about the Old Order approach to either religion or maintaining community.

She recalled a childhood where open affection or praise of any kind was suppressed. As an adult disconnected from this church-community, “I questioned why a religion made a practice of starving children of affection. Why else, if not to keep them compliant—so hungry they’d eat anything on their plate. Why else, if not to humble, hobble, and control?” (130)

She recited countless examples of the subordination of women to their husbands and to male church elders. When her father was an invalid, heading toward an early death, he still refused to let her mother make any decisions regarding the household's finances, even though she was basically raising their children on her own. Women and men sat on opposite sides of the church, and only the men had leadership roles. If a woman was abandoned by her husband, she could never remarry—her former partner had to die before she could remarry.

Human-created beauty was to be avoided. “No curtains dressed the windows of our bungalow. We used plain tan-colored roller shades to block the sun. No pictures decorated our walls. Drab, drab, everything drab” (41). Everyone dressed in a uniform style dictated by the male elders, which encompassed such details as the size and color of the required head covering on the women, the exact shape of “drab, dark garments” worn by females, and the black color and heavy thickness of their cotton stockings. The women all wore similarly clunky black shoes tied with laces, and all dressed in plain, dark garments with white-sheer head covering (38-39).

Though Ayers loved to learn and was a bright student, she was required to flunk twice to remain in middle school through age 16, when the state would permit her to leave the public school she attended. In her Old Order community, grade eight was the highest educational level a child was permitted to attain. “Although we were intelligent, if we wished to be obedient, we had to fail. The policy further separated us from the world and threatened to destroy the little self-confidence we had” (169). Ayers recalled a childhood of “drudgery,” occupied with such tasks as washing dishes, peeling potatoes, and dusting (30). And of “rules, rules—so many rules, and all designed to keep me from being like the classmates I envied” (35).

As an adult—married to a non-Mennonite and happily not immersed in the life of an Anabaptist church—Ayers “learned that Christmas meant bedecking trees with lights, garlands, and ornaments,” with stories of Santa Claus coming down the chimney and songs like “Jingle Bells” (121). She did not, however, have negative childhood memories of Christmas. In fact, she recalled Christmas Day as a rare opportunity to experience respite and relaxation with her immediate family. When her father felt well, they went to

a Christmas church service. When he didn't, they sang hymns at home, made a special meal, and played games like Monopoly and Chinese Checkers.

Ayers' first memory of breaking with the norms of her Old Order community was rolling down her black stockings at her school, in an effort to look more like the non-Mennonite girls wearing white bobby socks. She hungered for decorative buttons on her dresses, higher hemlines, nail polish, and her hair in a style other than parted in the middle and braided. By the time Ayers was a twenty-something woman in an urban office environment—far from her farm community roots—she was able to embrace fashion and beauty to the extent of entering herself into a local beauty pageant.

Ayers' journey out of her Old Order Mennonite culture was by way of attendance as a teenager at a large evangelical, non-denominational church in Akron, Ohio, led by a married couple who had a lavish lifestyle. They explained that God wanted his children to have the finest (109). Ayers noticed, however, that the couple's church flock was largely poor and deprived, though they gave as much as they could to their church. The church's wealth devolved to the personal benefit of the couple and their immediate entourage.

On this topic alone, Ayers wrote approvingly of the church leaders of her childhood:

I recalled the Old Order Mennonite pastors, their wives, and their families. These pastors served unpaid and plowed the fields during the week while their wives canned and quilted, and their children milked the cows. Their homes or vehicles were no better nor worse than those of the people they served. Indeed, anyone coming into our community could never have identified the shepherd from his sheep. A request for dollars was never made during the Old Order services. Nor was a collection basket ever passed. Members of the congregation willingly mowed the grass, cleaned the church, and performed other maintenance required without reimbursement. On rare occasions money was needed to repair or paint the church. The deacon circulated throughout the community and collected the dollars needed to purchase necessary materials. Then everyone helped with the work. (110)

Her overall verdict, however, was that the Old Order Mennonite leaders were intent mostly on controlling others. "They have retained the ways of the past and rule by oppression and fear," maintaining a religion that did not sow "understanding and love" as Jesus did and that did not "evolve to meet the needs of the people" (171). Ayers resented

the fact that “we learned early to give up our identity for the good of the community” (121).

Conform to the World, or Not?

When the majority of the Mennonites lived in their own farm-centered communities and had little contact with the greater world—that is, when they lived more like the Hutterites do today (i.e. unto themselves)—they had relatively little need to exert inordinate effort to uphold their distinctively lived theology. Those Mennonite communities that were not agrarian (notably, the ones that took root in urban areas of Europe during the Renaissance) relinquished claims to non-conformity by the 1700s. Probably not coincidentally, only traces of them remained by the 1800s. By 1914, the men of Mennonite heritage living in urbanized Germany were fighting in their country’s wars (Juhnke, *World* par. 65-70).

It is hardly surprising, then, that when America’s Anabaptists perceived a strong threat of being assimilated into surrounding society, many of their communities retreated into what today’s sociologists have called “authoritarianism”—that is, strictly enforced codification of their practices (Kniss 32, 87). Leonard Gross has called the 1880s to the mid-1900s a “sterile” period for the Mennonite church when it was immersed in defining “doctrinal categories,” rather than in emphasizing “a more existential and descriptive Anabaptist approach to faith and life” (196). Redekop refers to an “authoritarian movement” in the early part of the twentieth century, which he says was largely corrected by the 1960s with a movement back to congregationalism (i.e., to decision-making residing in the local church):

The manner in which the elders—especially the “Bishop Board” of the eastern Pennsylvania Mennonites—have exerted their authority and influence on all aspects of religious and social life has yet to be documented and analyzed. But it can be stated that many issues—such as excommunication, the ban, and women’s role in the church, to name only a few—were effectively decided upon and enforced by the elders-bishops; hence, in many congregations for many years the congregational nature of the Mennonite tradition was seriously attenuated. Many Mennonites have left the tradition in response to the arbitrary enforcement of power, and many people carry the scars of embitterment from authoritarian rule. (*Mennonite* 70)

Gross credits Harold S. Bender and the 1944 publication of Bender's *The Anabaptist Vision*, with leading the church to return to "a normative (Swiss) Anabaptist-Mennonite theology, as it had been articulated over the centuries, whereby discipleship found its fulfillment within the gathered community" (196). Ironically, after acknowledging the damage done by authoritarianism, Redekop wondered if the church had over-corrected, moving so far toward decentralized and consensual decision-making "that it is difficult for leaders to emerge."²⁸

Of course, not all church-communities and congregational elders were authoritarian, even in the face of serious threats to their way of life. Many sought to rely on persuasion or exhortation, as evident in the plea by this Mennonite editor-writer in 1930:

I wish there were some way to make more of our dear young people see the beauty of non-conformed dressing. It reveals that sweet modesty which all admire so much, and puts the emphasis of life on things more important. . . . The world respects a person who dresses by principle. . . . Dear young people, if you must be fashionable, don't drag the name of our beloved church with you into the world. Remember, to be a Mennonite means to be separate from the world. (Erb 23)

In any case, the demands of the Mennonite church-community to conform—whether strictly (notably in past decades) or more leniently (especially in recent years)—have galvanized the work of a number of Mennonite-born writers.²⁹ They have highlighted the psychological repercussions of Anabaptists being ostracized by their families and shut out of their community when they didn't conform to its prevailing norms regarding marriage and divorce, gender roles and sexual matters, dress, profession or avocation, and expressions of religious faith.

²⁸ In his book *Mennonite Society*, Calvin Redekop hypothesized that the authoritarianism most visible among Mennonite congregations in the eastern United States between 1940 and 1960 stemmed from an attempt to deal with the ways industrialization and urbanization were leading to the assimilation of their people and the erosion of their congregational life (64-65).

²⁹ Rudy Wiebe, Patrick Friesen, Katie Funk Wiebe, Di Brandt, Julia Spicher Kasdorf, Rhoda Janzen, and Omar Eby have written on this subject. Some of these writers are from the wider Mennonite stream—i.e., wider than the focus of this paper—but their works have resonated with modern Mennonites of all backgrounds across North America.

Julia Spicher Kasdorf, for example, refers to overcoming the marks of being Mennonite frequently in her poems and essays:³⁰

Some of my thirty-something urban friends from traditional Mennonite backgrounds are working hard to get over whatever sets them apart from the mainstream, feeling the conflict between a Mennonite past and their present lives is best resolved in the privacy of a psychotherapist's office. At times, I almost feel this way too. Perhaps if I write enough Mennonite poems, I will one day break through this invisible sphere that both comforts and confines, and at last be released into what?... the world, whatever that means? ...a clean, blank space free of our inescapable history? (Kasdorf *Bringing* 10)

John L. Ruth has served as a bridge between traditional Mennonite culture and those rebelling against it or cut off from it. Raised in a conservative Mennonite family, Ruth made his way up the ranks of higher education, through a 1968 doctorate earned at Harvard University in English and American literature, while wearing the plain shirts and jackets of his community of origin. He embraced new, useful tools—such as filmmaking—while remaining tied to the traditional Mennonite world and interpreting it to outsiders.

Ruth's pamphlet *Mennonite Identity and Literary Art* (originally presented as the Menno Simons Lectures at Bethel College in 1976) solidified his stature as an articulate, erudite advocate of preserving the Mennonite church-community.³¹ Ruth wanted its basic value to be recognized, even if one advocated for necessary changes. He told Mennonite writers to draw upon “the drama of their covenant-history” and to be willing to “sift the inspirations from the irritations of their narrow culture.” He asked them to “assay gold as well as shovel away gravel” (8).

In *Mennonite Identity*, Ruth “made his most complete theoretical case for a Mennonite literary agenda oriented to the central values and experiences of the community, rather than the ironies and dysfunctions on the boundaries and edges”

³⁰ Julia Spicher Kasdorf was raised in a Mennonite family—about whom she has written frequently—but now belongs to the Episcopal Church. In an on-the-record interview for this dissertation on May 20, 2011, Kasdorf explained that she still views herself as Mennonite in the ethnic sense of the word.

³¹ A series of essays by different authors, *The Measure of My Days: Engaging the Life and Thought of John L. Ruth*, was issued to honor Ruth in 2004, though the essays were not wholly favorable to him. His critics questioned Ruth's emphasis on upholding and yielding to the Mennonite church-community.

(Juhnke *Review*, par. 4). Through his published writings, collegiate teaching and documentary filmmaking, Ruth worked to dispel ignorance of Anabaptist history and of the unintentional consequences of making thoughtless assaults on the tradition.³² John D. Roth sums up the intellectual confusion that Ruth was trying to address:

In the years following World War II, as a predominantly rural people became overwhelmingly suburban; as hog farmers and carpenters became factory workers and corporate executives; as homegrown ministers became seminary-trained professionals; as authority of every sort devolved into group consensus and church discipline disappeared altogether; Mennonites in the 1980s suddenly found themselves inheritors of a host of words whose historical meanings had been eviscerated by a revolution few realized was even in progress. (15)

Ruth argued passionately for knowing one's "home base," for developing a deep understanding of Anabaptist heritage and how it has given rise to certain practices and attitudes. He noted that it is often first-generation Mennonites—who tend to have taken the trouble to study Anabaptism and to choose to embrace it—who call Mennonites to their true heritage (*Mennonite* 56). He explained that non-conformist clothes, among other lifestyle choices, have served as symbols in the way that reenacting the Lord's Supper and the cross serve as "symbolic aids." For the Anabaptists, such lifestyle choices symbolize important values like "nonconformity to the world, unity, humility and even reverence to God" (34).

Ruth found it painful that the classic Christian virtue of "humility" has been made into a cliché, "a hangover from an age when people apparently didn't like themselves and were ashamed of being 'assertive.'" He urged modern Mennonites to recognize and appreciate the "deep meaning" of being humble (57). As a case in point, there are valid reasons why Mennonites have avoided being stylish or in fashion over the centuries: "'Fashion' has to do with the wish to be noticed or to be considered in step with the

³² In John L. Ruth's words: "The sociologist stands ready to dissolve that meaning [of the Anabaptist covenanted community] by his tables and graphs, the ecumenical preacher to find rhetoric to make it appear selfish in its particularity, and its only remaining defenders, the parochial obscurantists, to reduce it to the level of tribal ethnocentrism. As the sense of covenant-identity wanes, intelligent church politicians will view their assignment as the wise dismantling of a no longer functional sense of uniqueness, and the judicious assistance of the process of getting rid of a denominational messianic complex. It is all quite predictable, ingrained in the noncovenant logic of sect-to-church evolution. Only imaginative risks offer escape from the inexorableness of this oft-proved logic." (*Mennonite* 53)

world's current taste,” both motivations “dysfunctional” for life in a community devoted to other life purposes (18). Ruth elaborated:

Personal innovation or deviations from carefully defined group norms, which have the effect of highlighting the individual, are unwelcome [in traditional Mennonite communities]. This is the key to the evil of “ornament”: it calls special attention to a person, sets him apart, and thus invites competition from others who also crave attention. It panders to the pride of life, the taking of egoistic rather than general satisfaction in God's creation and our life in its midst. It is linked to selfishness, injustice and war. Since the individual ego is the cause of so much trouble, it must be severely controlled, humbled, and made to play a supportive rather than a central role. (36-37)

Similar to the two Old Order Mennonite men quoted earlier in this paper, Ruth argued that Anabaptists have never frowned at appreciating beauty—great joy has been taken in producing Fraktur art, lovely quilts, exquisite linens, fine woodworks, and even savory foods. “What was not allowed,” said Ruth, “was for the tail of personal satisfaction ‘to wag the dog of the communal spiritual purpose’” (37-38).

Yet Ruth also made it clear that he understood the restlessness of Mennonites, especially the young adults, raised in parochial communities. He expressed regret for those “guardians of tradition who rule by authority rather than charm by story” and who make the “inherited values crabbed and joyless” (57). He had taken his own restless journey:

My late adolescent search for absolutes that would order chaotic youthful emotions led me toward whatever guideposts were then visible. The local bastions of churchly order that were taking a last stand for the folk-tradition were already being beaten down by influences from the radio and newspaper. Soon television would swing the gates wide open. At such a moment, when I asked, “Who am I?” the public schools said, “You are an American,” giving me stories to read and songs to sing that proved it. The Army said, “You are a defender of the national borders.” The economy said, “You are a consumer and a producer.” Some of my academic peers said, “You are a potential scholar.” But John Horsch's book, *Mennonites in Europe*, oversimplified and chauvinistic as my later reading showed it to be, also caught my attention, saying, “You are a Mennonite, a son of a covenant.” Cautiously, I began to weave connections between my childish trust in my parents' values and the historical precedents of my covenant-society which I was discovering. I began to feel that I was part of a story.³³ (66)

³³ I confess to shamelessly over-quoting John Ruth. In his *Mennonite Identity and Literary Art* Ruth said all I have pondered and more in beautifully crafted sentences such as: “The cultural grass is made to seem always greener outside of the heritage. At the opposite, equally narrow extreme are those who can ascribe no dignity or humane interest to alternatives to their own cultic outlook.” (61)

The group harmony prized by Amos Hoover and alluded to by Ruth has been studied by David Augsburger, who did his 1974 doctoral dissertation for the Claremont School of Theology on how hostility was handled in a Mennonite church community. He found “sharply lower mean scores on assault and verbal hostility for both men and women” and “significantly lower scores on irritability and negativism,” but “higher mean scores on guilt” (qtd. in Redekop, *Mennonite* 98). The guilt may stem from the Christian theology of sins that must be constantly battled and from falling short of the standards set by the church community.

Writing from the late 1800s to immediately following World War I, German sociologist and political economist Max Weber “considered any attempt to create a social ethic and community founded in absolutist adherence to the Sermon on the Mount as doomed to fail” (qtd. in Rubin 33). Thus, in Weber’s mind, why bother trying?

In the face of such skeptics—and amid strong countervailing currents over many centuries—Ruth said he is more impressed “that my heritage reached me at all, than that it had to reach me through manifold distortions,” including “our frequent betrayal” of values held dear. “Not Judas but Jesus is the center of the story, though Judas’ treachery must be included in the telling,” he wrote (63).

Walter Klaassen agreed: “The reality and seriousness of the abuses accompanying the attempt to be obedient to Christ do not invalidate the attempt” (*Anabaptism* 142). Klaassen acknowledged “the potential for coercion in a closed society like an Anabaptist congregation” (32). Nevertheless, on the whole, the Anabaptist church has been “an area of order and wisdom in the midst of chaos and folly” (145).

Tony Campolo, a well-known contemporary evangelist who is not Mennonite, has applauded the way Mennonites have been “committed, not simply to individualistic sanctification, but to becoming a sanctified fellowship that would stand over and against the dominant culture, endeavoring to be God’s showcase of what the whole world could become if people endeavored to live out the Sermon on the Mount” (86). This shows, he said, that they are (or have been) people who refuse to resign themselves “to being less than what God wanted them to be” (86).

An Uncertain Future

Research findings reported by sociologists J. Howard Kauffman and Leo Driedger (of 3,083 members from five Mennonite and Brethren in Christ denominations in 1989) and by Conrad L. Kanagy of a similar demographic group in 2006 show that the “modern Mennonite community” might be an oxymoronic term. In contrast to Old Order and very conservative Anabaptist churches, the modern Mennonite churches generally are declining in membership. In other words, those Mennonites who have attempted to bridge the fence between their ancestors’ separatist agrarian communities and the mainstream modern world are shrinking in number. They are simply slowly disappearing, probably due to assimilation.

Every schoolchild in America knows that our country permits freedom of religious belief. But what happens when believers with minority religious views actually try to live out their beliefs? What kind of social pressure do they experience if they refuse to take up arms against other human beings or decline to buy ever-increasing amounts of consumer goods? Or if they dress differently, opting for long, loose dresses rather than skin-tight jeans? All of us are under pressure to conform—whether that pressure comes from TV ads or from nationwide celebrations that celebrate military victories and soldiering.

Here is how Calvin Redekop has framed the modern-Mennonite dilemma:

Whenever there has been an interaction between the Anabaptist-Mennonites and the host society, the cultural encounter has always been unequal. . . . As Mennonites have confronted accommodation with the surrounding society, the pressures have been so strong that Mennonites have often relinquished some important and central traits without awareness of what was happening. For example, in the desire to become more relevant and helpful to the surrounding society, Mennonites have relinquished the strong mutual aid thrust. In the same way, nonresistance has been downplayed in many Mennonite groups as being inhibitive of outreach and church growth. In order to be successful in business activities, “old-fashioned” lifestyles have been sloughed off, and the traditional, telltale marks of hayseed Mennonites have been relinquished—“throwing the baby out with the bathwater.”

At every point where the “baby” has been thrown out, the action has been justified on the grounds that the discarded trait was not important or was merely ethnic or was even unbiblical. In this manner, individualist Christianity has been largely accepted by Mennonites without their recognition that a central element in Anabaptist-Mennonite theology and

life was being lost: “The humanist individualism which underlies the American creed is man-centered. . . . The divine order ... is love for God and love for the brother and neighbor” (Guy F. Hershberger qtd. in *Mennonite* 301).

A significant amount of the literature produced by modern-day writers of Mennonite origin has centered on rejecting, critiquing and distancing these writers from their roots. Many have treated their Mennonite church-communities as if they were prisons to escape. This is ironic, since sociologically these communities look as if they are shrinking as fast as the glaciers in our current era of climate change.

PART III. ON ART

Chapter 6

The Role of Art

Art *n.* Creative work or its principles; making or doing of things that display form, beauty, and unusual perception: art includes painting, sculpture, architecture, music, literature, drama, the dance, etc.

—*Webster's New World Dictionary*, second college edition, 1970

One of the briefest definitions of art can be found in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* online: “An object or experience consciously created through an expression of skill or imagination.” Based on these definitions of Webster’s and Britannica, can we say that art rises to its best and highest purpose if it demonstrates exceptional beauty, skill or imagination (and nothing more)?

“Yes,” argued one of the most prominent art critics of the twentieth century, Clement Greenberg:

All that can be asked is that it [an artistic creation] work. That it succeed. That it satisfy as art. It serves life as lived by serving itself, and when it serves itself satisfactorily, it stops all further demands or questions... [A]sking art to serve a moral, or any other end except aesthetic quality, is to make an illegitimate demand on art. (pars. 7 & 16)

If asking art to serve an end beyond “aesthetic quality” is illegitimate, it is an expectation that has existed across cultures and throughout history, until the adolescent stage of capitalism arrived in the twentieth century—where the value of almost everything, including art, boils down to its marketplace value. In short, the current Western concept of art—as something produced by autonomous individuals, working from their unique creative impulses—is a recent notion in world history.

Purpose of Art in History, Across Cultures

At the time that Menno Simons was living in the 1500s and for centuries before him, the main patrons of art were the Catholic Church and members of the royalty.³⁴ The

³⁴ “A Renaissance artist. . . was always acutely aware of the particular patron who commissioned or bought his work. In *Lives of the Artists*, Vasari recounts how Michelangelo was beset on all sides by the public demands on his time and talents” (Gablik 23).

visual arts, therefore, focused on religious themes or spotlighted persons in the ruling class. Music was composed for religious occasions. Architects focused on cathedrals and buildings serving the elite. If there were poems written by peasants about their everyday lives, they didn't survive to the present. In the Middle Ages and earlier:

The artist exalted the dominant values of his society, and society in turn recognized itself in an art that was expressive of its values. Both had a concept of man which was essentially a religious one. Religion, ritual, and art existed primarily to support the social order. (Gablik 30)

If we move further back in history, we arrive at the era of so-called primitive art. Creative persons in "primitive" societies viewed themselves as immutably part of a greater collective—rooted in some distant past, continuing over past, present and future generations, all with relevance to current life. In such societies,

the individual does nothing on his own account, apart from the social group. Indeed, nothing is more terrible than to be cast out of the collective and to remain alone. It is hard for us to realize that modern Western notions of the individual—his selfhood, his rights, and his freedom—have no meaning in the Orient, or for primitive man. (30)

The author of these words, Suzi Gablik, was writing in the early 1980s. She might be surprised at how widely "notions of the individual" have spread through Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, South Korea, Japan, and China in the last thirty years. But her point remains valid: in traditional, pre-industrial societies, art was enmeshed with everyday life. Beautiful carvings might accompany a deceased family member to his or her internment. Totems might be created to honor nature and for worship purposes. Sacred designs might be created in cloistered settings and then destroyed after they played their ritualistic role (47). But all of these purposes were much greater than any particular individual.

In primitive societies, the incentives for making art are chiefly non-economic; they arise from tradition, and from religious considerations. There is no art of revolt. It is only in some societies that artists are specialists. Carving a temple gate or making a set of ritual masks in Bali, for instance, is done anonymously. . . . The American Indians and the Australian aborigines valued art for its magical powers; and among the Kalahari of southern Nigeria or the Maori of New Zealand, sculptures are intended as "houses" for spirits, to achieve some control over them. In China the great painters lived like hermits, in the solitude of nature, from

which they drew their inspiration. They avoided the life of the court, and gave away their pictures. (52)

In the 2006 *International Handbook of Creativity*, five African scholars explained the social-group basis for art across their continent. They identified cultural variations in creativity— for instance, the Ibos in Nigeria and the Bamilekes in Cameroon are “relatively more dynamic, enterprising, and creative” than some other African groups— but in almost all cases, the creativity of an individual emerges from the collective wellspring of the culture and feeds back into it (471). This reflects the fact that traditional African societies place a higher value on community welfare (e.g., living in harmony or good neighborliness) than the achievement of personal ends (479). The indigenous languages of Africa contain no words synonymous with the English word “creative.” Instead, a creative African might be described as wise, resourceful, diligent, analytical, and clever—words that describe the way in which he or she uses creativity in the service of the group (479).

To the north and east of sub-Saharan Africa, in societies where Islam prevails, individual artists can be identified, but most of them operate within the boundaries of their religious tradition:

Arab artists developed their skills in the plant motif, the Arabic script motif, and the geometric motif. The medium is typically metal, stone, tile, or wood. . . . The general visual presentation of art is to repeat small elements with minor variations or unchanged in form. Arab music is similarly based on small elements that are repeated over and over, and the same repetition appears in literature as well as in the spoken form of the language. In Islamic tradition, creativity is not the creation of something new but simply an extension of the past. (469)

Mpofu and his four co-authors surveyed people in eight African countries for their views on the sources of creativity and the most common response, from 58 percent of the respondents, was that “creativity emanates from the way a person is brought up and educated” (472). Less than half as many (23.7 percent) thought that creativity came from personal agency or motivation. Only 9 percent thought it came from one’s natural endowment; even fewer, 4.3 percent, attributed it to a mystical source (as in, “it is a gift from God” or “sometimes it is a talent from God”). The scholars found “no apparent

regional differences in both the magnitude and rank ordering of the factors perceived by the participants to explain creativity in persons” (472-473).

Differing from the traditions of Africa, those of India hold that art springs from mystical sources. Yet India’s peoples share the African view that creative work belongs to the community and thus the actual creators tend to be anonymous. In the *International Handbook of Creativity*, Girishwar Misra, Ashok Srivasgava, and Indihar Misra write:

This tradition attaches little significance to the individual (author) in the creative process. In no other country can one find such a rich folk tradition, breath-taking architectural and sculptural works, monumental epics, and the meticulously elaborated texts in law, literature, and science that do not carry with them any signs of their creators. One reason for this is that creativity is attributed to spirit or divinity. . . . The search for the relationship between the inner world and the outer existence is a central inspiration to creativity. (432)

Virtuous Behavior Linked to Art

Part of creating sublime works, according to traditional thinking in India, is cultivating oneself to be a responsible member of the community—which means being anchored in a moral code centered on Dharma (duty), practicing self-discipline, and viewing knowledge as moral and sacred (425).

Although human beings are by nature restless, unstable, greedy, selfish, impulsive, and so on, they have an inbuilt disposition toward self-transformation through the acquiring of finer and subtler qualities of spiritual nature, which they can realize by cultivating an “observer (drashta) in their mind. The observer enables them to integrate various activities and emotions, expand consciousness, acquire purity in thought and action, and transcend (rather than suppress) impulses, to become fully liberated of all those concerns which constrain self-transformation.” (A. Roland, *In Search of Self in India and Japan*, qtd. in Misra et al. 425)

These views rooted in African and Indian culture—i.e., of the need of all peoples, including creative ones, to serve their communities, to work unselfishly, and to cultivate virtuous behavior all their lives—do not seem very different from those held by the classical Greek and biblical philosophers and by the Anabaptists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In fact, they seem grounded in the eons of human history. They make the urge for individual self-fulfillment—identified by Alexis de Tocqueville in the

early 1800s in America—seem like an adolescent fad in the greater scheme of human development.

Even in a society as westernized as modern-day Hong Kong, researchers have found these differences between the Chinese and American conceptions of creativity: “Westerners emphasize more sense of humor and aesthetic taste, whereas Chinese people tend to emphasize social influences, such as being inspirational to others and contributing to the progress of society” (Sternberg 4).

Art for Art’s Sake?

In contrast to artists in other historical epochs and in older cultures, modern American artists and their theorists, like Clement Greenberg, tend to embrace “art for art’s sake.” Gablik writes: “The bourgeois artist sees art as a private activity, as part of the quest for self-realization, and as a means for the release of the individual from traditional restraints. In these terms, to know oneself becomes an end, instead of a means through which one knows the world” (24-25). Knowing oneself does not seem to be a terrible thing, even if it leads an artist to be disengaged with the world. But Gablik argues that self-reflection is not where this process ends in post-modern America. It ends in self-promotional narcissism, to the detriment of both the artist and the well-being of society.

To be successful by today’s standards, Gablik says the contemporary artist is forced to stand apart from the pack and call attention to himself or herself, in the way that the advertising industry calls attention to the products it hawks:

Until we come to the modern epoch, all art had a social significance and a social obligation. To suggest that classical art was concrete but indentured (in the sense of the bondage attaching to a public task), and that modern art is free but abstract, is merely to point out that impulses to autonomy and individualism run counter to processes of socialization and tradition . . . No longer compelled to direct art toward the collective ends of society, he [the artist] must—if he can—distinguish himself through outstanding uniqueness. . . . Ever since the advent of romanticism in the nineteenth century, singularity has been the norm instead of, as in the past, mastery over technique, or skilled knowledge. The overarching principle of modernism has been autonomy. Its touchstone is individual freedom, not social authority. Liberation from rules and restraints, however, has proven itself to mean alienation from the social dimension itself; and perhaps the time has come when a more circumspect state of mind may perceive the need to strengthen art against its present condition of arbitrariness and fragility. As for the idea of freedom, we ought perhaps to examine it now

more closely, to see whether it does not have a perilous shadow side that is leading only to “the dead end of a narcissistic preoccupation with self,” which Christopher Lasch writes about with such pessimism. (24)

Gablik believes that the solo rebellions of artists in the early days of modern history were healthy. This would have been at a time when “modernist culture was uncompromisingly dissident and subversive—when its current was still running very much against the tidal patterns of the larger culture” (71). She applauds the way the original avant-garde artists combined “aesthetic innovation and social revolt,” choosing to live on the fringe of society (22). “By taking a path of active, self-sacrificing struggle, modern artists sought to improve the ethical image of our world” (72).

During the 1960s and '70s, however, late modernism began to cast up increasing instances of a self-referring formalism which denies to abstract art any kind of dissident role or meaning within the social framework. The stylistic innovations of the color-field painters who emerged around the critic Clement Greenberg—Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski—are only aesthetic; they harbor no revolutionary pretensions, no religious fervor, no remnants of transcendence hung like clusters of ice on the very trellises of dawn. Greenberg in particular rejected the notion that there is any higher purpose to art, or any “spiritual” point to its production. Art only does what it does: its effect is limited and small. It is there to be aesthetically “good.” Only the “dictates of the medium”—pure paint and the flatness of the picture plane—were held to be worthwhile concerns for painting. The very idea of content was taken to be a hindrance and a nuisance, and looking for meaning was a form of Philistinism. (22-23)

Not coincidentally, this is the period when painter Warren Rohrer (1927-1995), one of the best-known of modern Mennonite-born artists, developed a following in Philadelphia and New York City art circles. In his hallmark style of hatchmark brushstrokes and layers of paint on large canvases, Rohrer made no claim to producing works that had a message or served a purpose other than to look interesting and different: “He said he was accountable only to his art. ‘The subject of the work is the act of painting itself. . . .’ A painting ‘doesn't have to be anything other than what it is. . . . It is the tradition of art-making that I'm responsible to. . . . My dialogue is with the art itself’” (Roth 22). Though he married a Mennonite whom he met at Eastern Mennonite College, he and his wife quickly distanced themselves from their Mennonite roots and did not raise their two sons within the Mennonite church tradition (Lofton, *Branching* 4). Rohrer

may have been fleeing from the realistic, church-oriented art of his home community, but he ended up hewing to the standards of another community: the post-modern art world in urban USA.

Success Requires Conformity to Latest Trends

To succeed in the art world of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Gablik argues that an artist must fit into whatever the latest movement is—such as being a Minimalist in 1964, as Rohrer was, when the critics were praising this form of art and the galleries were eager to exhibit and sell it (60). Almost all serious American artists eventually go to a major city, typically New York, to promote themselves and interact with career-shaping dealers, curators and critics (59, 96).

The New York art establishment. . . is made up of a few thousand leading artists, collectors, art critics, historians, professors, gallery owners, and museum curators. They trace their genealogy to earlier artistic fields in London, Paris, and Berlin and thus own a certain ideological legitimacy. They take pains to verbalize, defend, and explain their choices in terms of accepted historical and conceptual claims. And because of their control of large sums of money and the media, they are in a position to decide what is good and which new works of art are worth attention. (Feldman et al. 152)

In *Mennonite Identity and Literary Art*, John L. Ruth made a similar point about opera—it is a highly stylized form of music based on elitist notions of who and what are worthy. To achieve success in opera, Mennonites have needed “to trill and strut in grandiose or affectingly pathetic poses, as the musical tradition prescribes” (24).

The value system upheld by the New York art world is individual fame and market success:

“To be successful as an artist,” according to [Andy] Warhol, “you have to have your work shown in a good gallery for the same reason that, say, Dior never sold his originals from a counter in Woolworth’s. A good gallery looks out for the artist, promotes him and sees to it that his work is shown in the right way to the right people. No matter how good you are, if you’re not promoted right you won’t be one of those remembered names.” (qtd. in Gablik 63)

Gablik notes that highly touted artistic productions in today’s world require the backing of underwriters—usually corporations, foundations and wealthy individuals who appreciate the social prestige and tax benefits of supporting museum exhibitions, cultural

television programs, concerts and the like (67). Most art today cannot be separated from its marketability. In a July 2011 *Washington Post* article entitled “Nothing Funny About Financing Comedies,” the president of Columbia Pictures explained that comedies are a declining genre in Hollywood because, in the globally oriented film business, culturally specific humor doesn’t sell well. “Filmmakers need to include creative elements in their comedies specifically designed to appeal to foreign audiences, such as computer-generated talking animals” (Fritz 2).

In sketching the different ways that art has been conceptualized—across history and through diverse cultures—my point is this: there is nothing neutral about art. There is no such thing as “art for art’s sake.” Not today. Not ever. If Michelangelo was subject to the demands of the Catholic Church and other wealthy patrons of his day—if Rembrandt had to cater to Dutch royalty and tiptoe around the Dutch Reformed Church—today’s artists are subject to the demands of our current secular market-based system to adopt an idiosyncratically individualistic stance and to *not* reflect communal or religious values.

Ironically, the proverbial quest of artists not to conform to the lifestyles and standards in which they were raised—certainly, this was a recurring theme among a third of the Mennonite-born artists surveyed for this paper—does not mean that they actually become absolute non-conformists. Instead they often end up conforming to a market-based set of standards.

Artists—for the sake of their careers—must increasingly shut their eyes to the hopelessness of ever harmonizing their aspirations, standards, and ambitions with the economic and social demands of the times. Since there is little doubt at this point that the career progress of professionals depends on making organizational values an intrinsic part of their lives, the artist gears his aspirations and his work to the situation he is in, and from which he can find no way out. Many artists remain prickly and ambivalent about this state of affairs, but the pressure to conform usually supersedes the importance of trying to achieve consistency between one's beliefs and actions. (Gablik 64)

Chapter 7

Mennonite-Rooted Artists

The arts can awaken us from our complacency and numbness to awareness and wonder. The arts foster the exercise of the imagination. They can also mislead us or seduce us with values that detract from an authentic vision of life. In our response to the arts in our culture, we must delicately balance openness and tolerance so that we may grow, while developing skills of discriminating judgment so that we know what is “good, acceptable, and perfect” (Rom 12:2) — Duane K. Friesen, *Artists, Citizens, Philosophers: Seeking the Peace of the City* (70)

Almost all of the 58 artists who answered the survey questions for this dissertation referred to their strong sense of Mennonite heritage, regardless of current church affiliation or lack thereof. Not surprisingly, the responses tended to be highly original and expressive. One supplied a master’s thesis to read. There were invitations to download music from a personal website, YouTube presentations, and written responses that varied from short poems to a 1,500-word essay. In all about 30,000 words were received.

The average age of the respondents was 59 years. Thirty-three of the 58 were male (57 percent), 25 were female (43 percent). The group included five respondents under age 30 and five over age 80. The spread of arts represented was wide: 32 percent were involved in the visual arts, usually as painters, sculptors, or ceramics artists; 23 percent were musicians, singers or composers; 20 percent were linked to drama or other performing arts via theater or film; 20 percent were writers of some kind; and 5 percent worked as fabric artists, with one designing fashionable clothing. As assurance that my survey managed to cut a wide swath, this breakdown of respondents compared favorably to the breakdown of members of the Mennonite Artist Project, as Anna Groff reported in the September 15, 2009, issue of *The Mennonite*: 29 percent visual artists, 21 percent writers, 19 percent musicians, 16 percent in theater, film or video.

About half of the artists—28 of 58 (48 percent)—remained more or less in the fold, participating in a Mennonite fellowship of some stripe. But the remainder—30 of the 58 (52 percent)—were disconnected from any kind of Mennonite church-community beyond visiting family and friends, though several of these explained they simply did not live anywhere near a Mennonite congregation. The majority (74 percent) talked

specifically in their survey responses of tapping their Mennonite heritage for their artistic work. Five mentioned finding a new sense of community among the artists where they now live and work.

Theologically, most of the respondents appeared to be more liberal than the families in which they were raised, but there were a couple of clear exceptions. For example, a composer-musician who runs a mission school in Asia wrote that she feels that the Mennonite church-community in which she grew up has lost its moorings: “The pressure I faced from the Mennonites was *not* to believe in Jesus, only believe in ‘peace, love and the Mennonite culture and heritage.’ It had nothing to do with God.”

Regarding those who had left the Mennonite fold, 12 percent appeared to remain within the Christian tradition; they were affiliated with a Quaker meeting, non-denominational congregation, or a Protestant church, often Episcopal. About one third—35 percent—seemed to have no faith ties, beyond historical ones through their families. Three persons out of the 58 referred to other spiritual practices that did not seem to be linked to a particular religious tradition.

Struggle over Value of Art

The majority of Mennonite-raised artists in this survey expressed ambivalence about their church-community’s treatment of art and those who produce it. Though attitudes toward art have varied considerably among the diverse streams of Mennonites, there is no question that the founders of Anabaptism viewed decorative or non-functional art with suspicion:

Anabaptist-Mennonites, as more closely related to the Zwinglian-Calvinist phase of the Reformation than to the Lutheran, shared with the former their objection to the use of art in religious worship or in religious activity in any form. With their emphasis upon simplicity, sincerity, and humility, art seemed to them artificial and pretentious, often dangerous and wasteful. (van der Zijpp et al. *Art*, par. 16)

A long-time professor of art recalled in his survey response that pursuing art wasn’t in the realm of consideration when he was growing up as the son of a Mennonite pastor in the era of World War II. Only when he was a graduate student at a large state university did he begin “listening to the voice within” and using abstract or expressionist

art to reflect original thought and feelings. This freed him from slavishly producing realistic images, the only images that he had seen thus far in his faith tradition.

Another visual artist said: “The traditional Mennonite environment I grew up in had a very narrow definition of what one can do in the arts and how arts should be used by Christians. Some still have the same ideas today: that is, seeing artistic expressions as being legitimate only if they overtly promote Christianity.”

A high school drama teacher recalled: “There was some limited artistic creativity in my home congregation, mostly related to crafts. . . . I was very covert about my creativity for quite some time. While growing up I was so thirsty for any creative input that I would literally study entire sections of the Encyclopedia Britannica that were related to art and drama—we had a set of encyclopedias in the house, but no television or stereo, etcetera.”

A musician who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s, wrote: “There was such a strong lack of appreciation for the arts, that some art forms were forbidden—dance and theater, for example. I began to realize that if I wanted to participate in any of these activities that I would have to leave the Lancaster County Mennonite sub-culture.” The musician’s father wanted him to be a scientist like himself. “My best coping mechanism for all these factors was to move to the West Coast where there were more progressive ideas afoot. There I was properly introduced to folk dance outside of the Mennonite sphere of influence, and more importantly, to the music that supported dance.”

A painter and sculptress said that one of her Mennonite grandfathers did botanical drawings and a Mennonite grandmother designed and sewed lovely quilts, but these artistic pastimes were conducted under the guise of education or usefulness. As an undergraduate at a Mennonite college, this aspiring artist felt she “needed to be of service and do practical things Girls were supposed to do nursing or teaching then. My major influences and my growth as an artist came after I got away [from her Mennonite community].”

A Mennonite musician and pastor who works today with youths recalled the eyebrows he raised by playing rock music in the 1970s: “I remember playing ‘Day by Day’ from *Godspell*. I played guitar and sang it, as part of working with the church youth group. One elderly church member came up to me afterwards and said, ‘I hope you never

play Satan’s music in the sanctuary again.’ . . .I learned to play banjo and mandolin, and I found that if I played bluegrass, I could draw listeners from both the rock and folk music groups. I grew to love bluegrass. I didn’t like the lyrics to most of the rock songs much anyway.”

A theater artist, who is now active in a non-Mennonite church on the West Coast, said he had to break away from his home community to claim his identity as an actor in the 1970s and 1980s:

Many family and community members did not see this as a viable career choice for a Mennonite, and I was greatly affected by the lack of support and even push-back from members of the community. The fear of being separate from and unsupported by my family and community kept me from exploring all the possibilities available to me in my teens and twenties. It was only by moving completely away from my community that I discovered the true artist inside me.

A visual artist, whose Amish-born parents raised him as a Mennonite, wrote:

I did feel pressure from the community in which I was raised, and had I stayed, my journey as an artist and as a person would have been arrested or possibly thwarted—at best, severely limited. . . . One is expected to sacrifice individuality for the good or welfare of the community, and I was unwilling, unable to do that.

Several of the performing artists commented on the difficulty of reconciling the Mennonite ideal of being humble while working in a field where competing for a role in the spotlight is a necessity.

There seemed at times to be something wrong with being “above the norm” or “extraordinary.” To do something different, like go off to a [prestigious] music school [with admission only through competition]. . . I felt like I was living this crazy artistic life that no one in my community could really grasp or understand.

A stage performer sought to explain the negatives and positives of being raised with the “be of humble service” ethos:

In some ways I know being part of the [Mennonite] community has made performing more difficult—I was trained to defer to others and be a servant, which conflicts with the sort of driven, necessarily self-focused requirements of becoming a highly skilled performer. It also, as you'd imagine, affects my ability to compete at times. However, there are huge ways that it also has helped. I know that I am more able to listen and humbly accept criticism. I also think it has made me more sensitive and

perhaps more open to the mystical aspects of creativity—it's opened my heart outward.

Six artists spoke of how their expression of sexuality had been inhibited by their Mennonite background. Only one of these specifically stated that this inhibition was linked to her same-gender sexual attraction—several others were vague on this point—but all had left the Mennonite church.

Nine artists spoke about being the children of missionaries and being raised in cultural settings where they often were the only Mennonites. These children absorbed the less-restrained musical rhythms, dance and art of their surroundings. They also had to negotiate feeling disconnected from the surrounding community, wherever they were. If they were in a foreign country where most of the population was not Christian, they were perennial outsiders. When they returned to their supposed home culture, they were different from those who had never left, making them part of the world's rootless “third-culture children.” Of these nine, only three are still affiliated with a Mennonite church-community. The church-departure rate of 66 percent for missionary-raised artists in my survey was significantly higher than the overall Mennonite-artist departure rate of 52 percent.

Tapping Their Mennonite Roots

In her survey response, one missionary-raised artist, explained her differentness this way:

Ever since I was young growing up in east Africa, the drumming and dancing stirred a passion inside of me. Drumming wasn't considered directly bad, but was something belonging to another world that I didn't have access to. The dancing, however, was something that not only was I not permitted to do, I also wasn't able to let myself do it. I experienced the way I inhabited my body to be culturally controlled—externally and internally—and [this] took many years to overcome.

Yet after spending 15 years “living a completely different kind of life,” this artist circled back to the edge of a Mennonite community. Now in her mid-thirties, she works with a graduate program in a Mennonite college in the United States. In her survey, she explained that she has arrived at the point of needing to do “the work of integration,”

referring to integrating the Mennonite heritage of her childhood with her adult interests and passions.

Leaving the Mennonite community gave me more freedom to create. However, I left in such a drastic way—in a way that the dialogue between where I came from and who I became was not present—that there was a certain kind of meaning that became lost, that I was always searching for. When I returned to the fringes of the Mennonite world, my creativity began to blossom. It is almost like that tension of individuality and group is one of the best dynamics to bring out the best expression of me.

The West Coast theater artist quoted earlier in this chapter also spoke about how he continues to tap his background, despite leaving his community decades ago. He views his work as “a ministry,” in which he helps people to “stand in another’s shoe and explore what it means to see life from someone else’s point of view.” He also believes his Mennonite heritage has caused him to be drawn to “stories of redemption and grace.”

The visual artist whose parents had been raised Amish, also added caveats to his statement about how his journey as an artist would have been thwarted if he had remained in his Mennonite community:

Looking back, I can’t think of a better background for an artist. Where else could I have grown up surrounded by the rich poetry of earth and sky, without television, radio, computers? All these things, while valuable, generally cloud and fog the spirit, especially when combined with American materialism as we know it today. I developed my imagination, which I now think is one of the most important gifts for any artist or person.... I am now able, with distance and perspective, to appreciate the unique beginnings I had, and to feel that the (aesthetic) austerity of my upbringing and attending conflict fueled my work, giving me deep roots, and also something to rebel against.... I absolutely could not have stayed in that constricting world [of the Amish-Mennonites]. And yet, I think that wellspring is at the core of who I am and the work I do. My desire is to produce work that is more than pigment on canvas, but a deep expression of beauty, memory, and hope.

A writer spoke of her early struggle to find her own voice, adding that she later realized her voice actually had to flow from her Mennonite headwaters:

I would say the struggle to have individual expression coming from a community that values communal expression was one of the key formative factors in my early artistic development. In my early years, it was as though I was squeezing water out of stones. Eventually, I saw that the

stones were merely my perception of limitation, and I entered a much greater flow in my work at that point.

By her 30s, she was collecting stories from the older members of her Mennonite family, in a quest for “a sense of identity and rootedness and place that I had stripped away too quickly.”

Another female writer spoke of the creative “tension” between her Mennonite background and her writings:

Even though the tension to better fit the expectations of the Mennonite community is challenging, tension has always fueled my writing. I have written about this tension. I have written about family stories and explored the transition between generations, moving from a sheltered Mennonite community to educated, suburban life—what has been gained and lost.

A visual artist who struggled to gain the approval of her professors in a graduate art program in a large state university finally found her niche when she began doing something that nobody else in the program was doing—creating art from cast-off junk:

Oddly, it was only when I broke away from what I thought my professors wanted and really reached inside to find what I have to offer, what I need to be doing, what issues I need to address directly by my art making, that I made anything worth keeping. And the depth of my work and my technical prowess increased so that my professors changed from being non-supportive of my endeavors and found themselves surprised by what was emerging. This transformation was surely because of my religious instruction.

Touchstone Values

The sense of longing for a “certain kind of meaning” provided by Mennonite communities—as voiced by the missionary-raised artist based today in a Mennonite college—was *the* most common theme in the 58 survey responses.

The overwhelming majority of artists in my survey spoke approvingly of the ways in which they continue to hold onto at least some of the Mennonite values that were part of their upbringing and the ways that these show through their work. Two applauded the value that Mennonites place on working with one’s hands. Several referred to the Mennonite preference for aesthetics based on economy rather than embellishment, shaping these artists to (for example) hone their poetry and pare down their theater productions to their vital essence. Others referred to the Mennonite ethos of frugality, which encouraged them to be uniquely creative with materials that were recycled, found,

or culled from their natural environments. If all the positive remarks about Mennonite cultural attributes were thrown into one pot—kindness, being part of a caring family and community, living simply and peaceably, forgiveness and reconciliation, helping to relieve suffering, being of service generally, vocal music sung as a group—almost every artist surveyed mentioned one or more of these as being touchstones for their lives, even if they no longer viewed themselves as Mennonite beyond having familial and ethnic ties.

Several of the ones who spoke about having an inner censor did not say they wanted to be able to write anything at all, without any consideration of its impact on others. As one writer put it: “I’m glad that my background gives me a cause to think twice (or three or four or five times) about the reception my writing might get. It keeps me from being reckless, and it continually forces me to reexamine and question my own thoughts.”

In Their Words

These 21 excerpts from the survey responses reflect the sense of identity and core values retained from the artists’ Mennonite backgrounds, sometimes tinged with ambivalence³⁵:

1. “The values that I have, that are suffused in my lyrics, music and art spring right out of my Mennonite upbringing. I’m speaking of the culture of kindness, taking care of your neighbors, forgiveness, etc.”
2. “Underneath every song, poem, essay or musical review lies an Anabaptist influence: ultimately, connection drives my creative work. Asking the world to be something different. Peace, layers of peace, that is the core of everything.”
3. “My main driving question—that I have explored through much of my work—is the question of identity, belonging, place and purpose. This question emerges out of growing up with a strong Mennonite identity and leaving this personal identity behind in an attempt to find similarities and connections between peoples.”
4. “On the negative side, even as an adult I imagine a judging community on my shoulder that peers into the work I do and disapproves. On the positive side, I

³⁵ These quotes were slightly edited for spelling, grammar and clarity.

- have a deep connection to a people and a sense of community and I think that makes me very grounded as an artist and gives me lots of stuff to draw from.”
5. “I cannot simply write for the joy of writing. I have tried, and it doesn’t work. There is always someone I feel on the other end who is listening, and this is the service. I would say my impulse to serve through creative expression is a direct outcome of having grown up in the tradition that I did.”
 6. “Certain values and ideas come back regularly in my screenplays—the value of community, the easy temptation of human nature toward isolation, and the need to overcome that through intentionally choosing authentic relationships.”
 7. “The fact that I am passionate about music/art being a tool for transformation rather than just entertainment is rooted in Mennonite values. . . . I am interested in not becoming completely self-absorbed, in my art being a form of service (perhaps a different view of service than what I was taught—the kind of service that comes from bringing and giving of the fullness of who you are and what you have to offer, not from making yourself small. But it is still service.)”
 8. “My art (I’m a playwright) is informed by Mennonite values—being ‘out of the world,’ rejecting statism and militarism.”
 9. “I have left the Mennonite church, and I still struggle with how to value what I received from my Menno upbringing. I highly value community and collaboration in my present world and have spent much of my adult life searching for a community to replace the one I was raised with. The stories I choose to tell on the stage often reflect that search for belonging in the world.”
 10. “What remains true is that the values I hold most dearly in theater: that making theater is a communal, not an individual act, that theater’s roots lie in the sacred, and that theater and storytelling can be a bridge between peoples and cultures—are values I was raised with. The Mennonite emphasis on community—in sharp contrast to a society and ‘show business’ which is all about the cult of the individual—is a value that has affected the path I have chosen.”
 11. “My work does not carry a didactic message and is not recognizably ‘Christian,’ yet the values embedded within it are values I have inherited from my rich

cultural heritage. And playing out my imaginative life in public—from that place—is a kind of service.”

12. “In my art, the political, religious and peace themes have emerged more and more predominantly in the last decade. Prior to that I was more concerned about ‘whimsical’ art.”
13. “My ongoing connection to Mennonites is in part because I completely support their peace and service emphasis.”
14. “With time, I have recognized aspects of my work that have been influenced by my Mennonite upbringing. The first is aesthetic simplicity, or at least a tendency towards taking things with a lot of information and pushing them towards something more minimal. Another aspect is multiculturalism [as a child of overseas mission workers]: I have an openness to other people and ideas, even if I don’t agree with them. . . . [Another] important aspect is thrift—finding a way to use everything is almost always an important component in my process. I have a respect for the balances of nature. And I had an early understanding of the importance of following my own path, even if it is out of sync with the rest of the world.”
15. “Even though I am no longer strongly connected to a Mennonite community, I still notice an inner censor that is very Mennonite. . . . No longer belonging to a Mennonite community has probably given me a greater sense of individual freedom, but I miss the support and sense of belonging.”
16. “I pretty well left the Mennonite church as a result of its lack of acceptance of my being a lesbian as well as my non-Christian view of life/the world. However, over the years, I have really come to miss the Mennonite church and the people and feel I have never found again the unique community that makes up the Mennonites. I feel somewhat like a honeybee without a hive.”
17. “[Speaking as a musician and musical theater director] there is enough great repertoire out there that I don’t have to compromise my artistic integrity to conform to my community standards. In fact, sometimes I think the need to adapt might make me more creative!”

18. “Being Mennonite, to me, involves following Jesus, being a peacemaker, serving others, and exposing and working to eliminate injustice. I have not been interested in radically challenging cultural norms in my art in ways that would most likely alienate others. I do not, however, go out of my way to direct ‘Christian’ plays, and in fact, find many of them trite, uninteresting, and unworthy of production.”
19. “My personal situation was one of great mobility during childhood and there was no sustained community larger than my extended family, most of whom were moving away from their parents’ orthodoxy. As I grow older, I find great value in more conservative philosophies.”
20. “Like many Mennonites, I grew up singing a lot in church and it was probably my favorite part of Sunday mornings. I still find myself gravitating toward memorable, singable melodies, both in what I improvise and in the melodies that I compose.”
21. “I’m grateful for having a value structure to work with or against, as the case may be. Besides the innate respect for and concern with spirituality, I’m convinced there is an identifiably Mennonite aesthetic.”

Value-Based Art

Only a few artists entirely distanced themselves from their Mennonite roots in their survey responses. One woman—who is both a musician and a visual artist—said she feels “claustrophobic” in Mennonite settings. She described an unhappy childhood and added, “I just feel their version of a ‘call to community’ is intolerable and suffocating. I’m lucky to have a sensitive and compassionate husband who, even though he feels comfortable in the Mennonite world, gives me breathing room to be myself and find my own spirituality in nontraditional ways.”

Another Mennonite-born artist, who mentioned abuse and dysfunction in her family background, said she has learned to put her “entire self out there. . . . I’m a self separate from this cultural standard I grew up with. I am hateful, greedy, mean spirited, selfish, as well as kind and good. Part of me is sweet and kind, and part is rageful and irreverent. And ALL of me is okay. The downside of Mennonite culture for me was the insidious/covert pressure to be so good all the time.”

Given the ambivalence in most of the survey responses, it is remarkable that so many nevertheless resonate with Duane Friesen’s call in *Artists, Citizens, Philosophers* for the arts to help humans to know what is “good, acceptable, and perfect,”³⁶ rather than the call of a coterie of twenty-first century critics for meaningless art, as long as it is well-executed.

Almost all of the Mennonite-raised artists surveyed seemed to embrace the concept of doing good in some way through their work—43 (74 percent) of the 58 respondents said approvingly that they thought their art reflected their Mennonite-rooted values, including 15 artists who were no longer linked to any kind of faith community. In short, they differed with Clement Greenberg’s view that “art is morally, politically, and socially indifferent.”³⁷ In Anabaptist theology, all human actions have moral implications, whether one is producing art, doing business, growing crops, or teaching school. As one Mennonite theater artist put it: “I don’t know what ‘value free’ means—a play has to have a soul and say something.”

Several of the Mennonite artists pointed out that all arenas in which they operate have norms to which conformity is expected, including the commercial art world. “We are all children of whatever age we live in and whichever system we live in,” wrote one musician and composer. He continued:

As church limits were withdrawn in the 1970s, I found that the profoundest limiting factors were larger social factors such as the commercialization of nearly all music and the drying up of free markets and a societal norm which extols celebrity and pop and martial [activities]. The armed forces have huge budgets for musicians but not much room for

³⁶ Interestingly, the three words Friesen quoted from Romans 12:2 come at the end of a passage that surely ranks among the most-referenced by Anabaptists: “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

³⁷ Though Greenberg is famous for his thoughts on “art for art’s sake,” when his words are read in their original context, it is evident that he did not completely discount the importance of taking moral stances in life. In his “Autonomies of Art” talk, he said, for example, “A fiction celebrating cruelty will fail as art because it collapses aesthetic distance by offending too much in terms of life as lived. Art breaks out of its sphere when it uses something that too flagrantly violates morality without being subsequently corrected. Art simply can’t afford to do that. There may be exceptions, but I don’t know of them.” He explained that morality actually is more important than art: “Morality serves lived-life and there’s no higher court of appeal than lived-life. Sure, art is a part of life, it embellishes life and is one of the satisfactions of life, but it is still subordinate to other ends. Even though it is not a means or an instrument, it is subordinate.”

creativity. . . . Just opening up the chapel doors and saying ‘anything goes’ is not necessarily better than the lines I grew up with in the 1960s.

Two Mennonite women who have necessarily catered in their design work to wealthy customers—one doing interior design and the other doing fashion design—each wrote about having a sense of uneasiness about the ends to which their work was going.

Right after college, I worked in a high-end interior design studio and had the goal of someday having my own clientele. I thoroughly enjoyed the process of designing spaces that were inviting and working with beautiful colors, but I could never quite justify the high prices people were willing to pay for furniture and accessories. My Mennonite background of frugality and simpler living would never let my conscience rest even as I was giving my clients what they wanted. Their ‘old money’ lifestyles didn't stop being foreign to me and, in the end, the attitude of entitlement I sensed from many of them led to my decision to resign my position.

This designer now works with her mother-in-law, creating “fresh and original” artistic designs for hand quilting by other women, who are usually Amish. “Beyond the design part of our job, we try to run our business in an ethical, eco-friendly way,” she wrote.

We pay the women who work for us quite well and many of them contribute significantly to their family's income. We also reduce waste wherever we can, reusing some scraps until they are gone and regularly donating other larger fabric scraps to MCC [Mennonite Central Committee] for relief quilts. In so many ways, it is a comfortable place to work and create art.

The fashion designer, who remains at her drawing board in a large U.S. city, said she specializes in “simplicity in design, a more minimal aesthetic”:

I hold myself apart from the clothing and fashion world in certain ways because there are things I don't like about it. As Mennonites we are taught to be inclusive, empathetic to the poor and the oppressed. Fashion is a field that thrives on exclusivity and promoting an image of wealth. Clothing can be a joyful form of self-expression, but like anything else if there is too much of it, it becomes weighty and distorted.

Mennonite artists seem to wear a lens that causes them to see the systems in which they must operate differently, as if they were anthropological outsiders rather than enmeshed in the systems. One writer pursuing an MFA characterized the typical environment in higher education as “academia's rat race.” A visual artist said something similar about disliking the lack of collegiality she saw in the MFA program of a large

secular university, with teaching colleagues “undercutting” each other—very different from the supportive atmosphere in the small Mennonite college where she now teaches. Another visual artist, whose works are abstract and who is based in New York City, pondered “the possibly misguided amount of attention and interaction folks are willing to give to daubs of paint arranged in a certain way on a canvas.”

As a group, the Mennonite artists don’t seem to take themselves overly seriously—a result, perhaps, of those childhood teachings about humility. In their own distinctive ways, they still embody the radicalism of their Mennonite ancestors. Like the stock from which they sprang, they seem to be modest-living, resourceful, hard-working people.

PART IV. PSYCHO-SOCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Chapter 8

Individual Freedom Versus Community Conformity

The Mennonite writer who spoke in the previous chapter about struggling to have individual expression within a community that values communal expression may not realize that this issue is as old as America itself. In the early 1800s in the newly founded United States, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote extensively about the rise of individualism at the expense of community values. Modern-day sociologists, historians and psychologists have studied the subject and noted that the emphasis on individual freedom parallels the rise of mass-production economies rather than agrarian-based ones. Some of this change was positive, as we shall explore, but some of it has wrecked human relationships. In seeking remedies for this wreckage, a number of non-Mennonite commentators have expressed longing for the kinds of values embodied in traditional Mennonite communities. But yesterday's highly insular Mennonite communities had their flaws too.

* * * *

Tocqueville believed individualism was a healthy sign that Americans were emerging from “the ruins of an aristocracy” after their fight for independence and were experiencing freedom of thought and action. This, he said, was useful and necessary in early modern America. “People who have just attained independence. . . have a presumptuous confidence in their strength,” wrote Tocqueville. “Never imagining that they could ever need another's help again, they have no inhibition about showing that they care for nobody but themselves” (479).

He observed, however, that there were dangers in Americans tilting too far toward individualism and away from group-centered religious mores (xxiii). Though Tocqueville himself was not a religious man, he approved of the role of religion in providing larger social purpose and in inspiring individuals to join with others to realize that purpose (xxii). He believed religion-centered communities could, and did, mitigate the corrosive isolation of individualism and the destructiveness of the unchecked pursuit of one's personal interests (477, 478).

Based on his familiarity with France's ruling class, Tocqueville noted that people at the top of society's pyramid are relatively united: "Every rich and powerful citizen is in practice the head of a permanent and enforced association composed of all those whom he makes help in the execution of his designs" (486). In contrast, citizens further down the social pyramid will "find themselves helpless if they did not learn to help each other voluntarily . . . if they did not learn some habits of acting together in the affairs of daily life" (486).

Tocqueville hoped that citizens' groups and movements would serve as a counterweight against the possibility of despotism. Despots, he said, prefer members of the populace to operate in isolation from one another. The despot "calls those who try to unite their efforts to create a general prosperity 'turbulent and restless spirits' . . . and calls those 'good citizens' who care for none but themselves" (481).

Contemporary sociologists have confirmed a phenomenon that Tocqueville saw in its incipient stage: the growth of individualism facilitated America's transition from an agricultural economy to an industrial one in the nineteenth century. Today's impersonal business practices have been made possible by atomistic individuals who are able to shift easily from place to place, job to job, unencumbered by the traditional ties of farm-centered families and communities (Jason 20; Bellah 43; Etzioni, *Spirit* 116).

Old Virtues Supplanted

Qualities that were viewed as vices in America prior to Tocqueville's day—self-centeredness, acquisitiveness, and seeking immediate payoff (as opposed to cherishing inherited lessons from the past and considering the well-being of future generations)—became the new virtues in industrialized America. These new virtues upended the "old" virtues required for stability in traditional societies: moderation, truthfulness, loyalty, humility, self-discipline for the common good, and sharing of resources. Such virtues were advocated by Plato, Aristotle, and the writers of the New Testament, as explored in Chapter 4.

The old, traditional virtues guided the Dutch Mennonites prior to their rise in the mercantile economy of the seventeenth century.³⁸ They also guided the Russian

³⁸ The observations in this paragraph are fully explored, with citations, in Chapters 1 and 2 and Appendix A.

Mennonites prior to the development of a wealthy class of landowners among their group in the nineteenth century. In both cases, however, history shows that the more successful the Mennonites were in terms of the wider society in which they were situated, the more likely they were to relinquish the “old” virtues espoused by Menno Simon, such as living simply, caring for each other as brothers and sisters in the family of God, and maintaining a church-community that could serve as a light on the hill for others.

In North America to this day, there remain pockets of Mennonites that fervently cling to these traditional virtues, but most of them live in intentionally insular, agriculture-centered communities. Separated from the mainstream, it is likely easier to embrace the traits of moderation, loyalty, submission and humility than it is when a Mennonite lives in a competitive capitalist milieu where such traits often block one’s ability to be successful.

This dilemma is visible around the world where the remnants of indigenous groups and village-based societies have been flooded by industrial-era values. These societies are witnessing a decline in their ancient virtues of communally shared burdens and blessings as well as of respect for the group’s elders and the received wisdom and traditions that they represent.³⁹ There is less concern with putting the well-being of the family, tribe or group first. An educated male child raised in India in the eighteenth century, for example, likely would have been taught a moral code based on the concept of *Dharma*, roughly translated as “duty” (Misra et al. 425). Such a child would have been nurtured to overcome what was regarded as his innate tendency toward greed, selfishness, impulsivity, and restlessness through conscientious cultivation of his higher spiritual self. This would lead to self-transformation and ultimately purity in thought and action (425). This child’s concept of himself would have been relational—with those in his immediate circle and with the divine. His self-concept would not have resided in the amount of wealth and power he could accumulate.

People living in Muslim societies outside of the West have been particularly vocal in criticizing what they view as the moral and ethical debauchery of Western culture. A Muslim intellectual, Mohammed Elhachmi Hamdi, said: “Western democracy appears . .

³⁹ The observations in this paragraph were more fully explored in Chapter 6.

. to be running amok. It is hard to see why lax Western mores that weaken or destroy the family . . . should be exported to the rest of the world” (qtd. in Etzioni, *New* 239).

Child-Rearing for Higher-Level Behavior

A contemporary American philosopher, Amitai Etzioni, argues that humans have two natures: a lower one that he views as debased and self-gratifying and a higher one that he calls socially responsible and grounded in morals (*New* 170). In everyday terms, our lower natures might tell us to call in sick on a Monday morning and enjoy more sleep, while our higher natures might urge us to show up to do our work as expected. Or perhaps the tug-of-war would be between spending money on an immediately gratifying, high-performance car (catering to our lower nature) or saving those funds for a child’s college education ten years hence (answering our higher nature). Or between having an extramarital affair (lower nature) or maintaining fidelity to one’s spouse despite an attraction to another person (higher nature). Etzioni says it is normal to struggle between these lower and higher calls of nature. All religions and many cultures, stress the importance of putting priority on the higher call through applying “the golden rule” of treating others as you would wish to be treated. But such conduct does not come easily or even naturally.

It seems that we must be taught how to be human. We must be socialized into having a higher nature. Three documented cases of individuals who grew up without contact with other humans point to this truth (167-168). Discovered after they had spent their childhoods in the wild, these individuals could not be socialized to blend with other humans; they continued to behave as if they were feral animals. Based on these and other examples, social scientists have deduced that walking erect and using symbols of any kind are learned human behaviors—not to mention using language and understanding cultural matters. Social research since the middle of the last century has yielded this consistent conclusion: we learn our values from our social context—we are not born with an innate sense of right and wrong, with a moral conscience (Putnam 296).

Familial Attachment

The first training arena for humans is the social unit in which we are first nurtured—usually the family. Surrounding the family and supporting its role as a shaper of the next generation are networks of relationships, chiefly formed through the family’s

educational and faith associations, work settings and, in some cases, neighborhoods. Children learn to internalize the values of their surroundings and these gradually become part of their identity. “Internalization occurs in close, affect-laden relationships, often referred to as *bonding*. And these relationships are one of the two defining elements of communities” (Etzioni, *New* 168).

What Etzioni called “bonding,” others have called “attachment.” In the 1940s, British psychiatrist John Bowlby, joined by American psychologist Mary Ainsworth in the 1950s, studied children to ascertain the degree of bonding they had with their mothers. Bowlby and Ainsworth used the words “attached” and “attachment” to describe this child-mother relationship (R. Bowlby 11-26). The Bowlby-Ainsworth research groups found that securely attached children thrived as they grew up, in comparison to the children lacking a close relationship with their mothers or another devoted caregiver (J. Bowlby, *Making* 103; Siegel 170).⁴⁰ The attached children proved able to have mutually supportive relationships with others as they grew to adulthood. Natural selection favors those who are raised to have close communal relationships with others, argued these researchers (J. Bowlby, *Attachment* 226; Johnson 18). In short, humans’ ability to form emotionally supportive relationships with others is a source and a sign of strength.

Government and civil society leader John E. Gardner⁴¹ spoke and wrote extensively before his death in 2002 on the rise of destructive behavior in America, attributing it to nihilistic individualism caused by the absence of loving relationships, the disintegration of families, and the collapse of communities in which families are situated.

There has been much talk of the breakup of the nuclear family as a support structure for children. We must remind ourselves that in an earlier era support came not only from the nuclear family but from extended family and community. The child moved in an environment filled with people concerned for his future—not always concerned in a kindly spirit, but concerned. A great many children today live in environments where virtually no one pays attention unless they break the law.

⁴⁰ “Securely attached children developed good bodily regulation, attunement to others, emotional balance, response flexibility, fear modulation, empathy and insight, and moral awareness.... This strongly suggests that secure parent-child interactions promote the growth of integrative fibers of the middle prefrontal region of the child’s brain” (Siegel 170).

⁴¹ John E. Gardner was Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare under Lyndon Johnson 1965-68, holder of an endowed faculty chair at the Stanford Business School, and founding director of Common Cause, in addition to leading several other non-profit organizations.

We have seen in recent years a troubling number of very successful, highly rewarded individuals in business and government engage in behavior that brought them crashing down. One explanation is that they betrayed their values for some gratification they couldn't resist (e.g., money, power, sensual pleasure). Another possible explanation is that they had no values to betray, that they were among the many contemporary individuals who had never had any roots in a framework of values, or had torn loose from their roots, torn loose from their moorings. (“Building” 46)

Gardner pointed out that a person does not develop his or her conscience in a vacuum. It must be cultivated by the family and overall environment in which they are nurtured.

Shame, after all, is a social emotion. Individuals who experience it feel that they have transgressed some group standard of propriety or right conduct. But if they have no sense of membership in any group, the basis for feeling ashamed is undermined. And there is an African proverb, “Where there is no shame, there is no honor.” (46)

In a 1998 speech titled “The American Experiment,” Gardner offered insights on untrammelled individualism that were evocative of Tocqueville’s nearly 300 years earlier. “We are beginning to see that in our glorification of the unrestrained self, we forgot that the achievement of our shared goals (establish justice, promote the general welfare, secure the blessings of liberty, etc.) depends on some measure of social cohesion,” Gardner said. “What we need is a reasonable balance between the claims of individuality and the claims of community” (par. 9).

Gardner called for “a commitment to the common good,” requiring citizens to reject the fashionable notion of living free of the “web of old-fashioned commitments” (par. 41). Instead of gaining the freedom “to be a totally ‘liberated’ self. . . free to soar”—as promised by today’s social mythology—Gardner argued that having no commitments beyond self is a prescription for a hollow, ultimately unsatisfying existence that could lead to outright destructiveness in some of us (par. 41).

Adolph Hitler as an Example

Adolf Hitler offers an interesting case study for the potential destructiveness of unattached, highly solitary individuals, along with the importance of healthy families and communities. The seeds of Hitler’s hatreds as an adult may have been sown by his whip-

wielding father, who violently vented his frustrations on Hitler, his older half-brother, and their mother (Toland 8-13). By adolescence, Hitler was showing signs of social dysfunction while enrolled in a Catholic school that required him to commute daily from his home community. He reacted with hostility to all adults in positions of authority and organized disruptive antics and aggressive play, demanding the unqualified subservience of his fellow-pupils (Payne 26). Looking at Hitler's childhood through Bowlby's attachment lens, Hitler clearly had a traumatic relationship with his father and had no attachment to a home community—the family moved a lot—and to the schools of his formative years (Toland 8-13). Yet, he *did* have a close bond with his dotting mother by all accounts. When he was 18, he remained attentively at his widowed mother's bedside during the last months of her year-long battle with cancer (Payne 55-59). Perhaps this one personal attachment of Hitler's was not enough to offset the emptiness of his life otherwise, especially since his mother died at a time when Hitler was failing miserably at his dream of being an artist (a dream violently opposed by his father when Hitler first voiced it as an adolescent boy) (58, 25).

Concerning wider social influences on Hitler, from age twelve onward he devoured Karl May's six dozen novels featuring a heroic adventurer named Old Shatterhand (27-28). This "hero" was a white American who enjoyed butchering native "redskins" and other races that he believed to be inferior.

Long after his boyhood was over he [Hitler] continued to read these novels, and he was reading them again while he fought the war against Russia, which exceeded in brutality anything Old Shatterhand ever dreamed of. Sometimes, when talking about the Russians, he would refer to them as "Redskins." (28)

After the death of his mother, Hitler seems to have had no relationships where he was not the controlling, dominant personality. "He had no family, no intimates, no loyalties, no faith in God, no faith in people," wrote biographer Robert Payne (457). Though born and raised in Austria, Hitler refused to serve in the Austrian army when drafted (100-101). Instead he joined the Bavarian army and fought in World War I where he shared the German shame of a humiliating defeat followed by economic deprivation. Eventually he became infamous for his fanaticism wrapped in a blaming, avenging, charismatic personality. Centuries before Hitler's life, Tocqueville observed that

Americans pursued money and power not as ends in themselves but as a way of achieving identity (xxii). Was Hitler following a similar pattern of seeking power to achieve a sense of identity that he so sorely lacked?

Hitler re-built Germany's decimated communities—but on terms that benefited only certain segments of his society. To foster groups like Hitler Youth and his storm troopers, Hitler employed techniques that many non-violent communities, including traditional Mennonite groups, also use as social glue—enforced standards for dress and appearance, common rituals and language, references to shared ethnic roots, shared emotional connection, and a call for self-sacrifice for the greater good.

Communities Can Be Destructive Too

As shown by this glance at Hitler, simply building community—with no qualifications about the moral basis of that community—is *not* the answer to the world's ills. Communities can be cultish and dangerous when they tilt toward leadership that is sacrosanct and become places where dissent is suppressed, individual gifts disregarded, walls maintained to keep out the “other,” and outside information and communications discouraged. Chapter 2 touches on the cultish oppressiveness of the modern-era Bruderhof, an Anabaptist-type community established in the 1920s. But the Bruderhof may not be an anomaly.

There are many Anabaptist communities with longer histories and deeper ties to the legacy of Menno Simons that have stifled even mild forms of deviation from their norms. The stories of two Mennonites recounted in Chapter 5 showed their divergent reactions to firm pressure to conform to their community's norms: (1) Amos Hoover approved of his community's practice of expecting conformity, even in outward appearance, as an expression of a person's willingness to live humbly for the sake of the community and serving God; (2) Esther Royer Ayers found such absolute conformity to be oppressive, inhibiting one's ability to live a satisfying, meaningful life.

In the modern Mennonite world, as represented by the surveyed artists and the contemporary Mennonite scholars cited in this paper, almost all intellectually hungry people would agree with Ayer's desire for freedom of choice. As an example, Lee Snyder, who held a number of top administrative positions in two Mennonite universities from 1984 through 2009, was raised in a Mennonite church-community in Oregon where

the males sat on one side of the sanctuary and the females on the other (Snyder 25). Women were not expected to attend college, much less have a career outside of the home. They were required to have never-cut hair and to wear what the Mennonites call “prayer veils,” which look to outsiders like thin caps over the crowns of women’s heads. Snyder’s childhood community had “strictures against radios, flashy cars, immodest dress, and anything worldly, from Christmas trees to professional sports” (26). Snyder shed these strictures in her quest for engagement with the broader world, including overseas experiences, higher education, and satisfying employment. She has remained, however, a deeply religious person continuously connected to Mennonite church work.

Artists surveyed for this dissertation mentioned painful splits in their family-church history over whether certain innovations were acceptable, such as using English (rather than a dialect from the old country) and having Sunday-school lessons for children. In his analysis of conflict within the U.S. Mennonite Church from the late 1800s through the mid 1980s, sociologist Fred Kniss found that American Mennonites have endured “frequent if not continuous conflict” between those he dubbed the “traditionalists” and those he called “the change-oriented progressives” or “communalists” (188-189).

The battles among the Mennonites—typically over the forms and outward appearances of their religion, rather than over the actual religious beliefs themselves—may have yielded healthy dividends in one respect, according to religion sociologist Julius Rubin: the Mennonite world had to make room for new influences and leadership. These conflicts may be a reason Mennonite church-communities have largely avoided devolving into cults destructive to their members and threatening to non-members (Rubin 189). If we accept the premise upon which the Mennonite Central Committee bases its peace work—that conflict is an inevitable part of life and can be a venue for learning, growth and change if handled well (Schrock-Shenk 12-13)—the next stage of modern Mennonite church-communities might be to fully embrace their conflicts and to view internal dissent as opportunities for everyone involved to gain wisdom.

The Open-Door Principle

In the New Testament, it is clear that the early Christians welcomed a diversity of gifts in their midst and that they tested their understanding of Jesus’ teachings against

each other, rather than expecting an authority figure to make the call. In Romans 12:4-8 and 1 Corinthians 14:26, Paul refers to the various roles that male church members could play within their community—as teachers, apostles, prophets, healers, miracle workers, and administrators. Paul’s list wasn’t exhaustive or futuristic. Artists weren’t there, nor were scientists, business entrepreneurs, farmers, and many others. And women were told to be silent in church (1 Cor. 14:34-35). Clearly, however, Paul was celebrating the diversity of gifts within the early Christian community, as he understood them: “All members do not have the same function. . . . Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them” (Rom 12:4-6, *RVS*).

Paul’s broadening words, coupled with the way Jesus reached out to despised tax collectors, women of ill-repute, and people from ethnic groups different than his (e.g., the Samaritans), suggest that biblically guided Mennonite communities should not live cut off from their surrounding societies. Even from a secular point of view, “the sound community has seemingly contradictory responsibilities: it must defend itself from the forces in the outside environment that undermine its integrity, yet it must maintain open, constructive, and extensive relations with the world beyond its boundaries” (Gardner, “Building” 45). For maximum well-being, then, Mennonite communities need to have metaphorical doors to allow individuals to exit and enter depending on their life stages or callings, as well as metaphorical windows to permit fresh air and illumination from outside sources. Some individuals need to maintain the stability of the community. Some need to raise uncomfortable questions regarding the community. At times those who play the stabilizing role may switch to the questioning role and vice versa.

Yet Mennonite-style Christian communities—like other types of communities—cannot be places where diversity prevails anarchically. All communities need some kind of structural coherence to exist. They need a foundation and walls not to collapse and disintegrate, melting into their surrounding environment. “Group members’ legitimate needs for boundaries to protect their intimate social connections have often been overlooked,” say David W. McMillan and David M. Chavis, who sought to define “community” in a 1986 issue of the *Journal of Community Psychology*. “Membership has boundaries; this means there are people who belong and people who do not” (9).

Their definition of community centered on four criteria: (1) a feeling of belonging, of sharing, of relatedness; (2) a sense of mattering—you to the group, the group to you; (3) having some of your needs fulfilled through resources provided via group membership; and (4) shared emotional connection (9). By these criteria, communities can be formed not only by religious groups, but by military units, sports teams, addiction-support groups, college alumni associations, and fraternal or service groups.

One additional characteristic of these groups—indeed of communities in general—is the role of *accountability*. “You must discipline yourself to do what is expected of you for the welfare of the team,” wrote famed college basketball coach John Wooden (94). If the player was undisciplined, Wooden would bench him. A person in Alcoholics Anonymous will not “out” someone else in AA to the outside world—this would be a serious breach of the confidentiality pledge that all AA members make. A “Hokie” student at a Virginia Tech football game would not flout social norms by sitting among fellow Hokies and cheering loudly for the opposing team, even if that team were from his hometown. A member of the Freemasons would be reprimanded if he revealed their various secret rituals and code words to non-members. In short, the boundaries of communities are typically marked by distinctive behavioral rules and rituals (McMillan and Chavis 9).

This view represents an interesting juxtaposition to the decision of most modern Mennonites to leave behind the language of their ancestors, along with distinctive clothing and rituals that might set them apart from mainstream Christians (such as the “brotherly kiss” and footwashing⁴²). The Mennonite artists surveyed for this paper do not view the insular communities of their forebears as ideal models for contemporary or future Mennonite communities. About half of them wish to combine the support and sense of belonging of these communities with openness to fresh influences and to needed change, such as parity between males and females. In a published statement, painter Robert Regier argued that he and other artists under the Mennonite roof are uniquely

⁴² This refers to members of the Mennonite church greeting each other with a kiss on the lips—men to men only and women to women only, based on Romans 16:16—and washing each other’s feet at the close of a communion service, based on John 13:4-17 and I Tim. 5:9, 10 (Wenger 112, 150-151, 222).

equipped to hover at the edge of their church-homes, serving as window openings: “The artist is the transparency through which one well-defined reality can catch a glimpse of another” (26). Like McMillan and Chavis, Regier viewed community boundaries as necessary: “If it were not so, it would be impossible to distinguish one culture from another” (26).

Opening communities to the ebbs and flows of diverse influences requires community members to be skilled in collaborative problem solving and to be committed to loving attempts at mutual understanding—much like the model advocated for healthy marriages and families today. If community members can agree upon core values and goals, then room might be made for diverse expressions of those values and for different paths to those goals.

Tolerance and acceptance must begin with a willingness to realize that we do not need to be threatened by those who disagree with us. It must include appreciation and respect for the right of others to dissent. When we have conquered our own spirits, then the way can be opened for a new kind of fraternal relationship which will preserve the personal dignity of those who disagree. Yet it should make possible a brotherhood relationship that is not necessarily made up of look-alikes but is rather the association of those who have common goals expressed in different ways. (Kraybill 24)

“Lucky” Communities?

Common Cause founder John Gardner, who made no claim to having a particular religious perspective, wrote about the “lucky” community which still possesses “a shared history and tradition.” Such a community would have a greater likelihood of passing along its norms to the next generation. In the following excerpt, Gardener’s definition of a lucky community sounds like *both* the old, insular Mennonite communities and the modern Mennonite communities that wish to be engaged with the world:

The possibility of wholeness is considerably enhanced if the community has a shared culture, i.e., shared norms and values. If the community is lucky (and fewer and fewer are), it will have a shared history and tradition. It will have symbols of group identity, its “story,” its legends, and heroes. Social cohesion will be advanced if the group's norms and values are explicit. Values that are never expressed are apt to be taken for granted and not adequately conveyed to young people and newcomers. The well-functioning community provides many opportunities to express values in relevant action. If it believes, for example, that the individual should in

some measure serve the community. it will provide many opportunities for young people to engage in such service. (“Building” 42)

The difference between the old and modern Mennonite communities is that the old ones—that is, the traditional groups that gave birth to Amos Hoover and Esther Royer Ayers—are staunchly in favor of having explicit group norms and enforcing obedience. Tradition-bound Mennonite communities know they are minorities bobbing in a vast ocean that is different, and they are not disturbed by this fact. In contrast, many modern Mennonites seem ambivalent about having norms, values and practices that are distinctively different from the mainstream. A significant number express embarrassment about their minority identity, as will be explored in the next chapter.

Chapter 9

On Being Different

One of the roles of a healthy community is to give its members the validation, permission, and strength to uphold their distinctive identity. This “validation” is especially needed by families who are trying to nurture their children’s commitment to their community’s values amid a wider society that scoffs at these values. “The most common roots of a sense of community are in family life, when parents instill in children a sense of responsibility—for other individuals and for the group,” said John Gardner (“American” par. 15).

If a particular community has power and prestige, then it can be “different”—that is, small in numbers and engaging in rather odd practices—without causing discomfort or embarrassment among its members. For example, the Harvard Alumni Association is approximately the size of the Mennonite Church USA, each having about 100,000 members. But unlike a half-dozen Mennonites cited later in this chapter, members of the Harvard community do not seem embarrassed about their Harvard roots or about wearing oddly medieval-looking robes and hats, as they do at some academic events. In the same vein, British judges do not appear to feel embarrassed about donning shoulder-length horsehair wigs and ankle-length robes to appear in court. On the contrary, such distinctive attire is considered prestigious.

By contrast, Chaim Potok, an orthodox-raised Jewish writer of Hasidic roots, showed ambivalence in his four novels regarding the distinctive appearance and non-conformist practices of the Hasidic Jewish community in New York. In his top-selling novel, *The Chosen*, two young Jewish men on different paths become friends. One is being groomed to replace his father as the leader of his Hasidic Jewish community. His appearance from head to foot—uncut facial hair, black hat, long black coat and trousers, white shirt, white threads dangling from his waist—marks him as a member of that community, and he is allowed little contact outside of that community. This son wants more intellectual freedom than his community permits, though he feels deep love for his family and community. The other pre-college teen wears clothes that resemble those worn by non-Jews in New York and has no beard or sidelocks. He blends in. He

represents the modern conservative Jew and serves as an empathetic bridge for his Hasidic friend to the outer world.

The burden of being different described in *The Chosen* is similar to feelings conveyed by some of the surveyed Mennonite artists. Minority peoples who feel disdainfully marginalized are susceptible to “group self-hatred syndrome,” writes Redekop (*Mennonite* 300). Perhaps “group embarrassment” would be a more accurate description.

Appeal of Assimilation

Mennonite poet Debra Gingerich portrays a young Mennonite woman blending into mainstream culture in this piece of creative writing:

At the Rockvale Outlets next to a patchwork quilt of color-coordinated socks, you cut me off in line to request directions to a restaurant where you might find some Amish or at least Mennonites. You—hoisted up by shopping bags from Mikasa, Hugo Boss, and Donna Karin—ask the cashier what it's like to live among them. Do the buggies get in the way? You're in my way of picking up a quick pair of cheap Gap jeans before I drive home in my husband's bull of a car. Me, a cheerleader in a short pleated skirt, voted most energetic of my senior class, who has never buried my blond, sometimes dyed copper, hair under a prayer covering. I watch Star Trek, own two cell phones, you ignorant urban schmuck. I drank Chianti and danced to Blue Moon as a tattoo of a dove peaked out the shoulder of my sleeveless wedding dress. And this is how some Mennonites cut our bangs short, sassy from an issue of *Celebrities Hairstyle*. I want to offer you a Pennsylvania Dutch obscenity or something else of the Mennonite experience you're not looking for—a conversation about the Reformation, how Jacob Ammon led a schism over shunning or the impact of reading *Martyrs' Mirror* on a child. But the Amish Farm Museum across the street only offers carriage rides through the covered bridge until five and the cashier just finished writing directions to the Good & Plenty Restaurant. Tonight you'll feast on creamed corn and Shooflypie while I microwave my TV dinner into rubbery, stir-fried oblivion. (85)

John H. Redekop, a Canadian political scientist in the Mennonite-Brethren stream, wrote that he sometimes hid his Mennonite identity when he was a college student, feeling inferior and embarrassed. “During weekends in Fraser Valley, I derived both social fulfillment and spiritual blessing from my Mennonite milieu, but during the week I tried to blend in with the crowd, which included non-Mennonite Christians” (214). Michael A. King, a Mennonite publisher who is now dean of EMU's seminary,

struggled with similar feelings as a young man. “I felt myself to be odd and small and not quite up to par, saddled with gentle parents who wore coverings, didn't properly stand up for their rights, and forbade me movies. Within me grew the longing to be like other people, to really make it by amounting to something in the secular world” (14). John Howard Yoder, one of the most famous modern-era Mennonite theologians, says his post-Enlightenment education made him “as embarrassed as anyone about the limits of my particularity” when he was a young man (*Priestly* 44).

Kenneth L. Gible, an Anabaptist pastor, wrote in a Mennonite publication in 1983 about his embarrassment as a teenager in the 1950s to be seen in a restaurant with his mother where people would stare at her prayer covering. He was also embarrassed by his father's job at a feed mill, indicative that his family belonged to a plain and humble group of Anabaptists. His stream of Anabaptists, the Church of the Brethren, rapidly moved in the late twentieth century to accommodate itself to the world. By the 1960s, its youth were allowed to dress like everyone else, to attend dances, and even to join the army. “It was a great relief to do so,” said Gible. “It is very hard for an adolescent to be ‘different.’ . . . And yet. . . maybe we've lost something important along the way” (3).

Gible's description of the almost complete assimilation of the Church of the Brethren into mainstream America may exemplify what sociologist Calvin Redekop called “over-compensating psychology,” defined as a “willingness and even eagerness to sell out more than is necessary to indicate full acceptance of the values and norms of the dominant society” (*Mennonite* 300).

Therapy to Blend In

To explore their ambivalence about their roots, some Mennonites have turned to psychotherapy. As mentioned in Chapter 5, poet Julia Spicher Kasdorf has written of her “thirty-something urban friends from traditional Mennonite backgrounds” who have entered therapy “to get over whatever sets them apart from the mainstream” (10).

John Howard Yoder argued that therapy on a purely individual basis can undermine that person's ability to function in a community. Such therapy, he said, tends to excuse community members from the hard work of overcoming their differences. A therapist is paid to accept and support the patient sitting in his or her office, instead of advocating for mutual accountability and commitment to the well-being of the larger

community (“Binding” 25). The sociologists behind *Habits of the Heart* also thought therapy nurtures self-centeredness and minimizes the role of social loyalty and commitment (246).

Writing in a Mennonite periodical on the arts in 1984, Paul Toews takes a semi-humorous, sharp jab at the culture of Los Angelinos and their reliance on therapists:

Community is a foreign notion in the city of angels by the Pacific. . . . Mutual aid, brotherhood, sisterhood, peoplehood, fraternity, and small groups don't rescue you when you crash. Only the therapist does. It seems that everyone in L.A. is seeing a therapist. But the therapeutic tradition knows little about intimacy, closeness and reconciliation to a people. It knows little about we-relations, the being-with, the celebration of life together. Its catch phrases are terms like “self-actualization” and “self-authentication.” Its cure is frequently only an advanced form of the disease that temporarily numbs the patient. Its response to the lonely fragmented person is a private session with the shrink in a high rise office. (18)

This is not to minimize the positive role of one-on-one therapy for dealing with certain mental and social dysfunctions. Some kinds of self-denial, self-doubt, and self-hatred among Mennonites are indeed unhealthy and need to be addressed through means that may include therapy (Yoder, “Shape” 342). Though therapy can be helpful, it is unquestionably biased towards individualistic, rather than communal, solutions.

Originality or Conformity?

John L. Ruth, who wore distinctively Mennonite clothing while pursuing his doctorate in English and American literature at Harvard in the 1960s, staunchly advocated upholding and even feeling proud of the Mennonite difference in *Mennonite Identity and Literary Art* in 1978. He criticized Mennonite writers for “cultural embarrassment that pretends to be sophistication” and other efforts to “fit the fashions of the macrocosm” (22). He objected to the skewed insights into Mennonite ways provided by “socially and professionally upward-mobile” Mennonite writers embarrassed by the peculiarities of their tradition (64). At the time Ruth wrote these words, a number of Mennonite writers were trading on their heritage, gaining awards and teaching positions on the basis of their jaundiced treatment of people in their communities of origin. Ruth argued for deeply understanding both the liberating and confining aspects of the Mennonite experience and addressing these caringly and originally, though critically when necessary (49).

Do we really imagine, for instance, that Hawthorne would have written more insightfully had he had a subject less narrow than his ancestral Puritan culture? That *Moby-Dick* would have been somehow deeper if a grateful government had allowed it to be written on a comfortable pension, or that Henry James' novels would have been rendered more profound had he only been able, having escaped Victorian mores, to lead us frontally into his protagonists' private rooms and allowed his delicate imagination to detail for us an illicit copulation? If anything, did these cultural "limitations" not function to shape and focus the immense talent of these writers?

The best-known Mennonite writers seem to be producing works that are indistinguishable from the norms established by competitive fine arts programs, secular literary magazines and critics, and elite publishers like the *New Yorker* magazine. In keeping with current style, Mennonite poets aren't producing sonnets. Nor are they writing epic poems. Current fashion calls for cynical pieces that purport to expose the truth behind Mennonites' polite facades, as shown by the bestselling novel *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress*. Such conformity to hollow norms is what Ruth strongly objected to.

For me a concentration on the negative distortions is, at this cultural moment, the easier, less imaginative act, because the audience that matters is already convinced that there is inauthenticity in every heritage. . . . It is so commonly and incessantly asserted, in fiction today, that much human behavior that seems pure is inwardly rotten, that inherited ideals involve necessary hypocrisy, or that, to take a Mennonite example, our practice of nonresistance has contained many examples of ironic inconsistency, that to make this the burden of my approach would be for me a kind of conformity to worldly models. (64)

Nonconformity in Ethics

The majority of the artists surveyed for this paper revealed attitudes that marked them as Mennonite-shaped individuals, as discussed in Chapter 7. Even if they are indistinguishable from other people in the street, they generally hold dear their church-fostered beliefs in non-violence, the value of community, devotion to family, service to others, justice for all, appreciation of singing, and rejection of blind patriotism. A significant number evoked the traditional Mennonite emphasis on simplicity by referring to their preference for minimalist aesthetics.

A few respondents volunteered the insight that they have been able to hold ethics counter to those of mainstream society precisely because they grew up in a cultural context that affirmed the value of being different. A glass artist wrote:

I understand the worldly values of cost efficiencies, celebrity, and pure dazzle but I feel very lucky to have grown up around people whose first questions seemed to be, “Does it serve well? Will it serve well for my kids and theirs? Would my grandfather recognize it?.” . . . I have come to think that true radicalism (in this world that seems to value innovation above all else) may in fact be quiet conservatism. There is a progressive segment pursuing these ideas. The pursuit of my craft has been a wonderful metaphor for the philosophical struggles which each Mennonite individual must grapple with: the tensions of remaining true to a community which brushes up against a world which is very different in many ways. I feel wonderfully strengthened by my Mennonite identity and find both orthodoxy and apostasy to be equally intriguing and exhilarating.

A photographer-poet raised in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, said:

Certainly the beliefs Mennonites embrace, as well as images from our spiritual past, including those from *Martyrs’ Mirror*, continue to have an impact on my thoughts and contemplations. I suspect that part of my heritage is the dimension that most contrasts with the rest of the world today. As a writer, I’m continually working at how to translate those beliefs and that history into language and actions that address the issues of today.

A Mennonite husband and wife—ceramicist Justin Rothshank and painter-illustrator Brooke Rothshank—have taken the unusual step of posting a statement on their business website (www.rothshank.com/Contact_Us/about_us) to explain how their religious beliefs and their artwork are intertwined.

We believe that artwork and creativity are a catalyst for social change and economic improvement as well as enhancing everyday lives with beauty. Art gives a voice to the voiceless, enables self understanding, and provides a window into other cultures. These are among the reasons we have chosen to pursue lives as working artists. We commit to:

- respect and cherish our environment
- seek and promote non-violent means of reconciliation
- tithe regularly
- participate in a faith community
- educate ourselves and those around us

The Family and Child Rearing

Responding to questions about the influence of the Mennonite church-communities during their formative years, the artists almost always circled back to memories of their families. “I can’t really separate my family’s influence on me from my Mennonite-church-origins experience,” wrote a musician who now attends a Quaker meeting. She described frequent singing with her extended family in and out of church. She recalled her grandfather’s creations:

My grandparents’ stories of being Mennonites in Russia were retold in his artwork, and through drama and song in the operetta “The Dance of the Kobzar.” His artwork and the stories of the Mennonite sacrifices as pacifists made a huge impression on me. When I went on to study sculpture in college, it was my grandfather’s art that I saw in my mind. He expressed his deepest pain, faith and hope through his artwork.

Ted Swartz, leader of the theater group Ted & Company, is the brother of a visual artist, Tim Swartz. Their parents owned a small grocery store in a now-suburban area north of Philadelphia, near former farmland worked by the paternal grandparents. In an on-the-record interview for this dissertation, Ted said that he and his brother have always held to “the idea that there is something about family and community that is worth having, worth being loyal to. You can poke it and probe it, but you cannot disconnect lightly from it.” Ted wants to be in close relationship with others and recognizes that this requires a sense of mutual responsibility:

If I want the support of my family and community, I have a responsibility to contribute to them as well. I don’t believe in taking and not giving. I believe in sticking it out and working it out when we don’t necessarily agree with each other.

In terms of family, statistically Mennonites *do* stick it out more than Americans as a whole: In Kanagy’s 2006 survey, about 10 percent of Mennonites had been divorced at some time in their lives, approximately half the divorce rate of Americans as a whole, including those who belong to other Christian groups (62). The divorce rate among modern-lifestyle Mennonites has scarcely risen since 1972 even while other demographics have changed (62). The percentage of college-educated Mennonites, for instance, has almost doubled in that same time frame (60).

Some American sociologists say that families in general are an anachronism in today's highly industrialized economies—an inefficient throwback to life in an agrarian society.

As opposed to the new time-discipline of the world of business and industry, work in the family has continued to be task-oriented, changing in character in terms of time of day and season, responsive to individual needs and their variation, and intermixing labor and social intercourse.” (Bellah et al. 87)

To achieve professional success in modern terms, family members are under relentless pressure to loosen their family ties, since these ties no longer serve the purpose of production, as they did in a farm-based economy. In the absence of close family ties, citizens are free to accommodate themselves to the demands of the wider world. The maxim “when nobody else will take you in, your family will” points to a vestigial role for the family unit in today's socio-economic system. The system's casualties must be cared for, and family members and people of faith are valued for providing such care, as long as they do not actually challenge the system's heartlessness (Bellah et al. 219).

Mennonite families have proved relatively resistant to the disintegration of the family in wider U.S. society, probably because they tend to be one or two generations, at most, removed from the farm and because most Mennonite families are still nested within larger communities that provide additional social glue (Driedger 114; Kanagy 58-60). In a 2006 survey, more than 50 percent of Mennonites had lived in the same community for at least 20 years; this finding resembled that of a survey of Mennonites conducted in 1972 (Kanagy 59).

Though they frequently referred to their childhoods, few of the Mennonite artists surveyed offered thoughts pertaining to their own offspring. One playwright spoke of helping found a Mennonite church in a mid-western city where none had existed so that his children could experience being part of a Mennonite community. This playwright was the exception in terms of expressing a desire for his children to be shaped by the Mennonite ethos.

In a 1996 interview published in *Mennonot*, a now-defunct publication, theater artist Helen Stoltzfus delved into her life as a Mennonite-raised woman married to a non-practicing Jewish man, Albert Greenberg. Stoltzfus said their daughter Lydia, then two

years old, would never know what living in a Mennonite community is like, adding “I can’t take Lydia back to that world.” On the positive, Stoltzfus noted, “We’re bringing Lydia into the conversation, into a dialogue between these two religions and cultures” (S. Hostetler 7). Assuming Lydia one day becomes a mother herself, one wonders what religion and culture she will be able to share with that child?

Amos Hoover, the Old Order Mennonite man introduced in Chapter 5, observed that the choice not to raise one’s children with Mennonite values creates a vacuum that is readily filled with the aggressively marketed values of the wider world. Hoover and his wife Nora silently dissented when friends in Germany took pains *not* to influence their teenaged children. Instead these parents allowed their offspring to be shaped by people the Hoovers called “perfect strangers”—that is, teachers, peers and others outside the family who had no reason to care passionately, as their parents did, for the children’s spiritual well-being (J. Miller 224).

Individuals’ consciences are not innate, stresses Etzioni. We become attuned to moral commitments in our early environments. As we mature, we naturally adapt the value-laden tunes imparted to us (*Spirit* 30-31). But there is danger in leaving the choir all together. One or two credible, morally affirming voices are likely to be overcome by the bombardment of violent, sexual, self-glorifying, commercial noises (*Spirit* 24). Bellah and his colleagues argue that the support of a minority-cultural community is necessary if one wishes to maintain “moral integrity” that differs from the dominant cultural system:

Objecting to its authoritarianism and paternalism, religious individualists have often left the church or sect they were raised in. Yet such people often derive more of their personal strength than they know from their communities of origin. They have difficulty transmitting their own sense of moral integrity to their children in the absence of such a community, and they have difficulty sustaining it themselves when their only support is from transient associations of the like-minded. (247)

Chapter 10

On Valuing the Mennonite Legacy

The 400-year-old experiences of the Anabaptists contain positive and negative lessons for today's Mennonites as well as for all people hungering for alternatives to today's greed-based socio-economic system. The resilient, caring communities formed by the Mennonites in the sixteenth century still seem radical in their assertion that humans should strive to actually practice what Jesus preached. Even the periodic failures within these communities across history—the internecine squabbling, the stifling of some gifted people, the yielding to the temptations of wealth and power—offer valuable case studies of pitfalls to avoid.

As broached in Chapter 1, the sixteenth century predecessors to the Mennonites—labeled “Anabaptists” by their critics—represented a revolt against a church-state paradigm that had operated for more than a thousand years. Reacting to the wealth and decadence within the power paradigm formed by the church hierarchy, feudal lords and monarchs, the Anabaptists rejected the Roman Catholic approach to Christianity. Motivated by their own reading of the Bible, the early Anabaptists sought to model themselves after the teachings and life of Jesus and the early Christian communities inspired by him.

The Anabaptists began as part of the Protestant Reformation movement, but soon ran afoul of it when they insisted on “believer’s baptism” when a person was old enough to be clear on his or her beliefs. Thus they were early advocates of “individualism” and “human rights” in the sense of the right of each person to decide what he or she believed and to live accordingly. They also wanted complete separation of the church and state.

In his foreword to *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant*, Franklin H. Littell, summed up the radicalism of the Anabaptists:

The Anabaptists were condemned and defamed by spokesmen of the sixteenth century establishments because they refused to support the power-systems then emerging. The nation-states demanded that the churches bless their ambitions and sanctify their warring. When the Anabaptists refused to repeat the feudal oath, refused to bear arms, and withdrew from participation in the legally privileged and controlled churches, they struck a radical blow for liberty, conscience and human

dignity. Their devotion was directed toward true Christianity rather than social reform, but the secondary consequences of their spiritual emigration were also momentous. (Klaassen v)

Referring to America in the twentieth century, Littell added: “What the Anabaptists taught about mutual aid, peace, discipline, religious liberty, lay witness, etc. is as fresh and important as it was fifteen generations ago” (v).

Indeed Anabaptism today could be a movement as radical as it was in the sixteenth century, if Mennonites re-embraced their heritage of dissent in the face of today’s social and economic inequities. The early Anabaptists were unequivocal about the accumulation of wealth amid poverty. In the words of Balthasar Hubmaier, a Bavarian Anabaptist who was burned at the stake in 1528, “We are not lords of our possessions, but stewards and distributors. (qtd. in Klaassen, *Anabaptism* 56)

Menno Simons also believed sharing of wealth flowed from the practice of Christian brotherhood. When Simons mentioned the worst sins of his era, he almost always mentioned greed. In his polemics against the established church, Simons said that a test of one’s theology—or that of one’s religious leaders—is in how it is lived out. He objected to those who professed to be Christians but whose lifestyle contradicted this. Simons recognized the attraction of being among those with “plenty of everything” at the pinnacle of the social pyramid, rather than being aligned with the “poor, hungry, suffering, old, lame, blind and sick” clumped at the base (qtd. in Klaassen *Anabaptism* 55). Simons hoped that the Anabaptist church-community, where members voluntarily agreed to be accountable to each other as they attempted to live as Jesus taught, might counteract the human temptation to grasp for power and wealth.

In regions and eras when the Anabaptists were marginalized and persecuted, the church-community largely functioned as Simons hoped it would—as an oasis of mutual support for following Jesus in daily life by living simply, nonviolently, and cooperatively. When Mennonite communities became accepted to the point that their members were able to taste the benefits of success in the wider world, however, the egalitarian basis of their communities began to erode, along with their pacifism.

This erosion occurred in the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, Prussia, and Russia. The vast majority Mennonites who remained in these regions into the twentieth

century were either assimilated or eliminated through pogroms or forced migration. In becoming acceptable to the status quo, Mennonites necessarily accommodated themselves to the ruling ideology. German Mennonite Johannes Harder traces the gradual social conformity of the Mennonites in Germany—beginning with a period of religious toleration, followed by secularization and prosperity—that led to the Mennonites' embrace of nationalism and loyalty to the “Fatherland” prior to World War II (120).

In his preamble to *Mennonite Identity*, Hans-Jürgen Goertz noted that the German Mennonites sent the following congratulatory message to Adolf Hitler in September 1933, soon after he became Führer of the German Reich:

The conference of the East and West Prussian Mennonites . . . acknowledges with deep thankfulness the powerful lifting up which God has granted to our people through your accomplishment. On our side we promise joyous cooperation in the building up of our Fatherland through the power of the Gospel. (1)

Accommodation to nationalistic ideology is visible today among Mennonites in the United States. The majority of modern American Mennonites surveyed in 2006 (Kanagy 127) reported comfort with saying the U.S. pledge of allegiance, an act that would have been an anathema to their ancestors who said their only allegiance was to God and God's world. One-third of the Mennonites in Kanagy's survey endorsed flying the American flag inside a Mennonite church. A quarter of them supported the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

The assimilation of U.S. Mennonites into the status quo is not complete, however. Most of the pastors of Mennonite churches surveyed by Kanagy continue to uphold the traditional stance against identification of the church with the stances of the nation in which it is situated. Only nine percent of the pastors would be willing to position a U.S. flag in their church and only eight percent of them supported the U.S. invasion of Iraq (164). Even in the broader church membership, there is little glorification of war, with 71 percent agreeing that “all war is sin” and 65 percent saying that it is “wrong for Christians to fight in any war” (128).

Often it is newcomers to Anabaptism who call for Mennonites to reclaim their counter-cultural legacy. “I have often found myself urging Mennonite students and church leaders to recover their own radical heritage as a source of renewal and

inspiration,” wrote Stuart Murray in his 2010 book *The Naked Anabaptist* (17). He applauded the Mennonites’ traditional commitment to peace, as well as their recognition of the pitfalls of wealth, power, status, and control (41). When Stanley Hauerwas, a theologian based at Duke University, discovered the Mennonite tradition through the writings of John Howard Yoder, Hauerwas thought it embodied “the kind of community I was beginning to think was required by an ethics of virtue” (qtd. in Schlabach 48).

The virtues that the early Mennonites sought to foster in the life of their communities included “forgiveness for injury, refusal to retaliate, refusal to injure, refusal to coerce,” while “aiding, supporting and defending the needy, comforting the sorrowing, preaching the Gospel to the poor” (Klaassen, *Anabaptism* 30). Such attitudes and acts could not be left to happenstance. They had to be deliberate, conscious choices. “One must decide to do this rather than that. It is a commitment that every disciple takes upon himself at baptism” (30).

The early Mennonites accepted the possibility of ridicule or even persecution for being committed to virtues that may run counter to the prevailing socio-economic system. In recognition of this, Hauerwas chides modern Mennonites for being embarrassed about their ethnic roots: “It may be that ‘ethnicity’ is one way God provided and continues to provide for your survival as a people capable of remembering the martyrs that have made you what you are” (qtd. in Schlabach 220).

A number of the Mennonite artists surveyed for this dissertation referred to feeling suffocated by the demands for conformity to their communities of origin. They rejected calls to: limit themselves to practical, service-oriented avocations; dress in clothing that was deemed sufficiently modest and simple; avoid certain forms of worldly pastimes; attend exclusively Mennonite schools and churches; and choose a Mennonite spouse. They criticized the stagnation bred of Mennonites’ separation from the world. They also pointed to the hypocritical aspects of their church experience: to pastors who preached sermons on being loving and then unlovingly rejected people for their clothing choices or for marrying a non-Mennonite.

In leaving behind the objectionable aspects of their heritage, however, they are also ceding the high moral ground on which these communities were founded. John L.

Ruth, who earned a doctorate from a secular university in a secular field, staunchly defended his decision to retain his Mennonite identity:

What I can affirm about my heritage, in these days, is more interesting and is more valuable, even to a general audience, than what I can discredit. It is ultimately more important that my heritage reached me at all, than that it had to reach me through manifold distortions. (*Mennonite* 63)

Ruth argued that Mennonite artists are not the only community members who are denied “mere self-referral”:

Should business people have economic, lawyers legal, politicians political, or theologians theological autonomy? Is there a moral discount here for artists, in the name of requisite breathing space for the imagination? Is it uncreative to be accountable? (“Knowing” 255-256)

From his position as a government and civil society leader, Gardner called for Americans to learn about the “disciplines and satisfactions of community” in order to create a better world. Americans need to “understand teamwork, the observance of shared values, collaborative problem-solving and the building of trust” (“American” par. 16). He warned that “commitments beyond the self may involve hardship and self-sacrifice,” but he assured his listeners that their reward would be freedom from “the contemporary fate of rootlessness, hollowness and faithlessness” (par. 41).

Gardner sounds like a modern version of Menno Simons, minus the references to Jesus and the Bible. Perhaps the centuries-old heritage of Mennonites—with their long experience in community living—have something to teach Americans who want to develop roots and to extend their interests beyond the here and now. The Mennonite experience can also show which paths *not* to take, if one wants to remain true to one’s “virtues.”

CONCLUSION

Seven Lessons for the Survival of Modern Mennonites

Many of the beliefs and practices that have characterized Mennonites since the sixteenth century run counter to those that underpin America's current socio-economic system. Traditionally Mennonites have taken one of two paths when at variance with the society in which they are embedded: (1) they have retreated into their own insular, rural communities and thus retained their distinctive beliefs and practices, or (2) they have engaged with the dominant society, ultimately losing their distinctive characteristics and becoming assimilated.

Mennonites in the United States today, who are usually just one or two generations removed from their family's original rural communities, show surprising similarities to their urbanized forebears in Europe's "Low Countries." These forebears relinquished their distinctive beliefs over several centuries to the point of supporting their nation's wars by the 1900s. Is it possible for American Mennonites who wish to be involved in the industrialized world to avoid such assimilation? Might they draw lessons from their unique heritage and from contemporary psycho-sociological studies to enable them to be "salt" and the "light" in the world, as Jesus asked his followers to be?⁴³

Toward the end of this dissertation study—after I delved into the history of the Mennonites; considered the impact of industrialization on family and community life across cultures; explored the roles played by art and artists in various eras and settings; and pondered the responses of Mennonite artists to my survey—seven "lessons" began to take shape in my mind. I will describe the lessons briefly, then elaborate on them one-by-one:

Lesson 1. Living in relationship with others—whether in families, religious groups, communities or a combination of these—is humans' natural state and is conducive to the well-being of all. Thus the lesson is: *Be wary of the modern model of isolated individuals lacking a true community.*

⁴³ This refers to two passages in Matthew 5 (*RSV*): "you are the salt of the earth" (13) and "you are the light of the world" (14).

Lesson 2. A normal life requires us to adjust our individual desires in order to be team players and to somewhat conform to the expectations of those around us. We all must conform or adjust in some way—to our school or work group, the marketplace, our spouses and children, our unit in society. Absolute non-conformity is neither possible nor desirable. Thus the lesson is: *Given the necessity of conformity, one must choose what set of norms to uphold and conform to.*

Lesson 3. Upholding a vision and a lifestyle that are different from the dominant paradigm—that represent a minority viewpoint—requires joining with others for support and affirmation. Thus the lesson is: *To live out an alternative vision, one must be part of a community that seeks to embody that vision.*

Lesson 4. For a community to avoid stagnation or absolute control by one set of interests or viewpoints, the community must make space for the expression of individual gifts and conflicting opinions. Thus the lesson is: *Community members must balance individual and communal needs, accepting, respecting, and making space for dissenting or conflicting views.*

Lesson 5. Artists through history and across cultures have been integral to the spiritual and social functioning of their communities until the post-industrial marketplace caused many artists to accept the persona of solitary individuals alienated from communal ties. Thus the lesson is: *Artists can (and should) reject the post-industrial paradigm of self-absorbed art and instead contribute to the functioning and future of communities that share their basic values.*

Lesson 6. The influences and pressures exerted on children are manifold in today's world and often outright destructive. Any possibility of a family shaping the next generation in a manner distinctly different from the dominant culture requires a critical mass of like-minded people—in educational settings, faith-based organizations, neighborhoods, and cultural groups—to bolster the family's efforts. Thus the lesson is: *Invest in a like-minded community for the sake of the next generation or two.*

SUMMARY LESSON, No. 7: A house must rest on a solid foundation—and the Mennonites found that foundation in Jesus' teachings—but the house also needs windows and doors connecting that house to life in the surrounding world. Thus the lesson is: *To survive as examples of a better way of living, Mennonites need to be committed to*

church-communities that hew to agreed-upon biblical values, handle conflicts healthily, and accept the wide range of members' gifts.

Lesson 1:

Be wary of the modern model of isolated individuals lacking a true community.

Alexis de Tocqueville applauded the way Americans were freeing themselves from calcified, unjust social formations in the nineteenth century. The rise of individualism was a necessary part of this process. But, as Tocqueville predicted, this process may have reached the point of counter-productivity.

Though the processes of separation and individuation were necessary to free us from the tyrannical structures of the past, they must be balanced by a renewal of commitment and community if they are not to end in self-destruction or turn into their opposites. Such a renewal is indeed a world waiting to be born if we only had the courage to see it. (Bellah et al. 276)

Bellah and his fellow authors of *Habits of the Heart* believe modern-day America suffers from a mistaken sense of the meaning of life:

For over a hundred years, a large part of the American people, the middle class, has imagined that the virtual meaning of life lies in the acquisition of ever-increasing status, income, and authority, from which genuine freedom is supposed to come. Our achievements have been enormous. . . . Yet we seem to be hovering on the very brink of disaster, not only from international conflict but from the internal incoherence of our own society. What has gone wrong? How can we reverse the slide toward the abyss? (284)

To reverse the “slide toward the abyss,” Americans could either seek untried, new solutions, or they could look at solutions that have already been tried and learn from them. For the second approach, the Mennonites would be a good place to start.

For hundreds of years, Mennonite communities have been places where members drew their identities, gained social support, and contributed to the common good. These communities have also been places where women have been relegated to subordinate roles, where creative, dissident and visionary members have been suppressed. Unloving and angry schisms have occurred with frequency, belying biblical calls for reconciliation.

These failings, however, should not cause us to throw out the concept of community altogether.

Research into the importance of “attachment” by John Bowlby and his successors has shown that we need to live close to others. In the words of psychiatrist Daniel J. Siegel, “well-being and true happiness come from defining our ‘selves’ as part of an interconnected whole—connecting with others and with ourselves in authentic ways that break down the isolative boundaries of a separate self” (259).

A valuable sociological study would be to explore which Mennonite communities have been able to maintain a healthy balance between (1) providing space for the development of a member’s unique gifts and self-expression and (2) maintaining a cohesive community that both meets members’ needs and carries sufficient weight to exert influence on the outer world too.

Obligations to Community

Reflecting on the thousands of efforts at communal or collective living in the 1960s and 1970s, J. Winfield Fretz found that the arrangements were short-lived, despite making economic sense. Fretz says that communal groups motivated by secular agendas—social experimentation, economic idealism, humanitarianism—lacked staying power, usually lasting less than ten years. Faith-based communities tended to last the longest. Why? They provided overriding motivation for members to accept the obligations and make the necessary efforts to live in close relationship with each other (Fretz 13).

The modern bias toward the individual and away from communal obligations is reflected in the wording of the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Ratified in 1948, it focuses almost entirely on what the *individual* has “a right to” or is “entitled to.” These rights include security in the event of sickness, disability, and old age, as well as the right to the well-being of one’s family and enjoyment of the arts. Out of the 30 articles in the Declaration of Human Rights, only Article 29 hints that the individual must play a role to enable the larger community to offer these entitlements. “Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible,” says Article 29.

Lessons from the Corporate World

On the question of balancing individualism with conformity, Mennonite communities might benefit from studying successful models in the secular business world. The Shell Corporation, for example, operates on these three guidelines globally: (1) allowing pluralism—or “multiple identity”—within the organization, based on understanding and respecting the distinctive identities of the parts of the world in which Shell operates; (2) fostering decentralization or localization, thus making room for a high degree of independence for each operating unit; and (3) maintaining a strong corporate culture based on “simple but clear rules and principles which all are expected to recognize” (Cable 54). In sum, Shell permits a wide range of diversity and local adaptation as long as the underlying principles on which Shell operates are not called into question.

The key lesson offered by the Shell Corporation seems to be this: for any social unit—whether workplace, family, church, or community—to function effectively, there have to be “agreed-up standards of right and wrong that one can count on and that are not subject to incessant renegotiation” (Bellah et al. 140). This does not mean that the standards of right and wrong never change. Of course they do. But they are unlikely to change all at once. And at no time will they be fully endorsed by 100 percent of the members of the group. Belonging to a community means that one necessarily will disagree with some decisions of that community. It cannot be otherwise. Even highly functional families—with in-love spouses devoted to each other and their children—do not achieve agreement all of the time.

Lesson 2:

***Given the necessity of conformity,
one must choose what set of norms to uphold and conform to.***

Twenty years ago Mennonite theologian C. Norman Kraus called attention to the dangers of assimilation in an essay in an arts-oriented journal directed at a Mennonite audience, *Festival Quarterly*.

Following World War II, as we became increasingly acculturated, our professionals and business community moved rather boldly into secular circles. There is great risk in this action, and it is not clear at this point in

time what this will mean for our church. The only precedents for such identification with the surrounding worldly culture are the Dutch and North German Mennonite experiences.

However, I do not think that we have a good alternative to this strategy of entering the world as Christians. The great danger is that the church will be pacified and domesticated by the world. Will the church become, or has it already become, so implicated in this socio-economic and political network of society that it has trouble offering any kind of critique? . . . [It will be] tempting to simply accept the socially and politically legal standard as the morally right thing to do. (“Dreams” 17)

Kraus’s questions are similar to the ones that this dissertation raises regarding Mennonite and ex-Mennonite artists. What kind of critique are they offering of the status quo beyond the Mennonite world? How are they dissenting from it? Jeff Gundy, a Mennonite writer who teaches at Bluffton University, uses the forest ecosystem as an analogy for how the Amish create “unnatural systems,” crowding out diversity (82). I like Gundy’s image, but I wish he would extend it to our modern military-industrial “ecosystem.” Its managers are in the business of growing monoculture consumer products for incessant consumption. In the name of efficient modernization, the managers of this ecosystem crowd out the diversity—and the more simple and sustainable approaches—offered by minority religious communities like the Mennonites and the Amish.

Gundy posits inevitable conflicts between insular Mennonite-sectarian communities and “the world” (75). I would posit the conflicts differently. I see them as a clashing of different worldviews, both of which could be viewed as sectarian. Three examples of clashing worldviews would be: (1) the cooperative, informal pastimes of a traditional Anabaptist community *versus* the competitive, professional sports promoted by the majority culture; (2) the Islamic tradition of no-interest loans *versus* the modern Western practice of interest-bearing loans at the market rate; and (3) a nomadic, rural lifestyle, as exemplified by the Lapps in Norway, *versus* living in a U.S. city. The dominant cultural practice in each case (professional sports, interest-bearing loans and city living) would not be viewed as sectarian by most Americans. But why not? Why are these practices viewed as more legitimate than their alternatives?

Gundy wonders if Mennonites traditionally have crippled themselves and their children by wrongfully painting the larger non-Mennonite world as dangerous and

limiting their children's freedom of action and expression in that world (83). As a product of the non-Mennonite world, I concur with Gundy that the wider world is not necessarily dangerous. But it isn't neutral. It does not present a clean canvas on which a child can paint his or her liberated strokes. The larger world has its own game plan, its own rules for players, assuming they don't wish to be excluded from the game altogether.

One game rule in the developed West is not to look different from today's fashion norms. For dressy occasions, high-powered men need to wear a contemporary version of the suit and tie, not a Moroccan *jelaba* or an old-fashioned Mennonite plain jacket. High-powered women need to wear a well-cut suit or tailored dress, not an Islamic *hijab*, Bolivian *pollera* (long pleated skirt), or an old-time Mennonite cape dress. Another game rule is competing against one another to achieve upward mobility. Some African Americans have sought to defy the dominant norms of dress and behavior by favoring African-patterned fabrics and celebrating Kwanzaa between Christmas and New Year's, focusing on seven principles they feel are under-valued in today's society: unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity, and faith (Harris and Williams B1).

Upholding Minority Beliefs

Traditional tightly knit communities are disappearing everywhere, not just in the Mennonite world. Efforts to preserve "family and religious values" are coming from groups as diverse as the Sikhs, the Sunnis, the indigenous peoples of Bolivia, and the Hasidic Jews. Minority peoples do not wish their children to be inculcated in the dominant cultural liturgies rather than in those of their own peoples. Yet in the face of mass communications blaring day and night throughout the world—like those propagated by Rupert Murdoch's global media empire—minority groups look ineffectual and anachronistic, as if they were using carrier pigeons in our radio-wave age. They end up being viewed as "sectarian," while the dominant culture is viewed as embodying the natural and normal state of affairs.

Some theorists of globalization recognize, more fully than others, that the desperation able to spark violence and terrorism in many places around the world is not just (perhaps not even mainly) an economic desperation resulting from inequitable power relations between the haves and have-nots. Rather, it is also (perhaps most deeply) about the dislocation that people experience when the communal practices that had defined their

culture for generations, and with it their very sense of identity, are being trivialized and eroded, if not decimated outright. (Schlabach 193)

Tocqueville projected the possibility of a benevolent form of totalitarianism in the United States. He thought it would function like a kindly but domineering father or schoolmaster who keeps his charges in “perpetual childhood,” whereby the children stay preoccupied with their petty and banal pleasures, “each one of them withdrawn into himself, almost unaware of the fate of the rest” (Tocqueville 666-667). In such a system, Tocqueville said at best we “children” would get to vote for who dominates us (668).

Are we beguiled by “petty and banal pleasures” these days? Do any of us really exercise any substantive choices? Our freedom of choice seems to boil down to choosing between this new brand name and that new label. We can choose between this domestic car and that import. We can tune into this violence-centered TV show or watch that female-degrading movie. The dozens of choices we make every day turn out to be largely trivial. Our menu of options seems to be decided by Wall Street, Madison Avenue, Hollywood, or military-corporate interests.

We accept the limitations of our menu. It is acceptable for educated professionals to talk at their social gatherings of their passion for a professional sports team, blockbuster movie, or imported beer, but not of a passion for reducing consumption or prison reform. Following a money-generating sports team is almost a requirement for admission into mainstream society. Brian Gumm, an EMU seminary student, illustrated this point in recounting his friend’s identification with a football team.

[My friend said] “I go to church on Saturday mornings in an open-air sanctuary that seats 75,000 worshippers, watching the service play out on a 100-yard altar of green grass.” I believe the priest was the coach (of his team), and the players were the altar boys, perhaps. I’m not sure if the referees had a place in the analogy or not, but my friend was describing—in ecclesial terms—his devout allegiance to the University of Iowa football team, the Hawkeyes! This admission was given only half-jokingly but the allegory was strikingly accurate and honest in describing how a sports team lodged in a state university (not to mention the pervasive and lucrative capitalist endeavor that is major college sports) had successfully convinced my friend to spend significant sums of money on season tickets, travel, and food, and then invest the significant amount of time that is required to follow the progress of the team before, during, and after each season, as star players graduate and/or are drafted into the NFL, and new high school recruits with varying degrees of promise come for campus

visits and sign letters of intent. . . . Consider also the prospect of transmitting such devotion from generation to generation. Just as my friend fondly recalls childhood memories of his big brothers watching Hawkeye games as formative experiences, so my friend is teaching his son to be a true, black-and-gold-bleeding Iowa Hawkeye fan. (5-6)

If contemporary Mennonites are urged to uphold the standards of a particular Mennonite church-community, many will react with irritation or anger, judging by the essays, novels and poems of modern Mennonite writers. But how many would be equally incensed if they were employed by Disney World, which has detailed rules on how to act and look, along with penalties for failure to comply? If we are symphony musicians, we conform to the demands of our conductors. If on a sports team, we do what the coach says to do. We adhere to driving rules to keep our licenses, register for the draft if required, abide by zoning regulations, and teach to the government's Standards of Learning. In short, we conform in all kinds of ways everyday to prevailing norms. So why do so many of us question the norms of traditional Mennonite communities? Is it simply because they are different from the dominant norms?

John Howard Yoder observed that the pressures placed on Mennonites by today's schools, job market and media are not dissimilar to the pressures placed on their spiritual ancestors in the sixteenth century by the all-controlling state-church apparatus. The solution remains the same, he said: to maintain as much independence of thought and practice as possible through voluntary affiliation with a "free church" (Yoder, *Priestly* 26). Working with others to build and maintain a Mennonite-community identity based on the teachings of Jesus might counteract the draw of "money and power," the two main sources of identity that Tocqueville foresaw for Americans (xxii). If we don't wish to conform to the dominant socio-economic paradigm—that is, to be controlled by money and power—we will need to put our hearts and souls into an alternative paradigm. Borrowing a metaphor from the New Testament, fig trees don't yield olives and grapevines don't produce figs (Jas. 3:12, *RSV*). If we want a certain kind of "grapes," we need to plant, cultivate and harvest a certain kind of vineyard.

Lesson 3:

*To live out an alternative vision,
be part of a community that seeks to embody that vision.*

In their book, *The Social Construction of Reality*, sociologists Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann maintain that for anyone to hold a set of counter-cultural convictions within a society that deems them erroneous, there must be what they call a “plausibility structure”—that is, an affinity group in which “the individual can regularly revitalize his or her countercultural convictions and gain assurance that he or she is not crazy” (Campolo 93).

An individual may leave the countercultural group from time to time, according to Berger and Luckmann, but it is essential that such ventures be followed by renewal experiences that can only be had by returning to the community. An ongoing separation from the group will result in the group's beliefs and folkways becoming increasingly unrealistic and even foolish to the separated individual. (93)

Tony Campolo says the need for a “plausibility structure” particularly applies to Christians who want to live out the directives of Jesus. These “are far too difficult to be followed in the context of a society that is basically governed by a philosophy of Social Darwinism” (87). Christians cannot survive in isolation. “Individual Christians must gather to remind each other of the validity of what they believe and to recommit themselves to their beliefs and to each other” (93). They need to form communities that can serve as God's showcase of what the whole world could become if humans strived to uphold the Sermon on the Mount (86).

To stand against the conceit of the dominant culture requires courage, conviction, and other virtues generally cultivated in one's family and social networks. It requires a critical mass of people to offer a collective witness in a sustained manner over time (Schlabach 73). In John Howard Yoder's words:

To band together in common dissidence provides a kind of social leverage which is not provided by any other social form. The subordinate community with its own internal covenants is able to provide economic and social as well as moral support to individuals standing with it against the stream who could not stand alone. (*Priestly* 91)

Forms of support named by Yoder include “survivor’s aid,” refuge if persons are driven from the place where they are living or working, helpful feedback, and assurance that the dissenter is not carrying his or her burden alone. “Dissenters support one another in opposition in such a way that their combined power of resistance is far more than the sum of the resistance potential of each member taken separately” (91-92).

Menno Simons clearly wanted Anabaptists to position themselves “to do justice between a man and his neighbor, to deliver the oppressed out of the hand of the oppressor” (L. Harder 80). This is a difficult role. At an Episcopal church in San Francisco, for example, a priest spoke of the pressure his church felt upon providing sanctuary to undocumented refugees; his church was able to persist only because its members were unified in their decision to disobey laws they viewed as unjust (Bellah et al. 240-241).

One person—or even a handful of people—could not have achieved the successes of the U.S. Civil Rights movement led by Martin Luther King Jr. in the 1960s. Artists played a major role in producing plays, artwork, movies, books, poetry, and music that both contributed to and emerged from this movement. The movement tapped the moral tradition of Mahatma Gandhi, who in turn tapped Tolstoy’s Christian pacifism. In this way, individuals stood on the shoulders of historical figures and concepts, as well as arm-in-arm with others who reinforced their aspirations. It is not a coincidence that both Gandhi’s movement to lead India to independence and self-sufficiency and King’s movement were underpinned by religious ideals and principles.

Only with the support of a Christian community can . . . a lifestyle of nonviolence, loving one's enemies, sacrificial giving to the poor, and materialistic simplicity be sustained. This is true especially in the context of a society that believes that the powerful control of others, especially one's enemies, is the only basis for security, and that egoistic self aggrandizement via the accumulation of consumer goods is the *raison d'etre* for human labor. (Campolo 93)

Amos Hoover, the Old Order Mennonite man whom we met in Chapter 5, wondered if his type of community might serve as an example of alternative possibilities for modern Americans. “Our message is that their loneliness and isolation is not the only path. Maybe there are some gentle ways we Old Order people might share, through how we live out the beauty of community—Christian community” (J. Miller 226-227).

In 2011, we saw a new counter-cultural movement, sparked by “Occupy Wall Street,” sweep across America. I watched the news on this movement with sympathy, but with skepticism about its staying power. I agreed with what the “occupy” groups were protesting against—the consolidation of money and power into the hands of 1 percent of the population—but it was not clear what they were advocating for. The groups seemed to be loosely organized without clarity on what they all believed and aspired to—functioning like a series of whirlpools rather than a strong ocean current leading in a particular direction. The history of the Anabaptists could have taught them that to be effective counter-models and to sustain themselves, they needed to coalesce into value-based communities where members would agree to be answerable to each other. Consider this description of the early Anabaptists:

They were dangerous people. . . . They were revolutionary, but not in the sense of destroying and tearing down without offering an alternative. Rather they sought, in non-violent ways, to bring about change from one situation to another more nearly representative of God's will. They did this by means of establishing a new disciplined community. (Klaassen, *Anabaptism* 9)

Whether in the sixteenth century or in the twenty-first century, it takes a community to sustain long-haul efforts to transform the dominant paradigm. It may take multiple generations, as the anti-slavery movement did. Only a community that “holds and embodies an alternative narrative” can offer “a thoroughgoing critique of the illusions of this age (or any age),” says Mennonite-raised Gerald W. Schlabach, who became a Roman Catholic. And, he added, there is no narrative to rival that of Jesus of Nazareth. (48)

“Being Mennonite, to me, involves following Jesus, being a peacemaker, serving others, and exposing and working to eliminate injustice,” wrote Melissa Friesen in her artists’ survey response.⁴⁴ Friesen is able to voice these views and openly try to implement them as a professor at a Mennonite institution, Bluffton University. She would not have the same leeway if she were mounting dramatic productions at, for instance, the United States Naval Academy or even in many public school systems.

⁴⁴ Friesen gave her permission to be named and quoted.

Lesson 4:

Community members must balance individual and communal needs, accepting, respecting, and making space for dissenting or conflicting views.

As mentioned in Chapter 8, the Mennonite Central Committee and other Mennonite organizations involved in peace work (e.g., EMU's Center for Justice and Peacebuilding) hold that conflict is an inevitable part of life and can be transformative, sparking learning, growth and change if handled well. If this position were fully embraced, Mennonite communities should feel as vibrantly alive and full of possibilities as an artists' cooperative in New York City. Or better. Mennonite communities would also be bastions of purpose beyond self or the enrichment of members of the cultural elite. And there would be a wide range of roles that individuals could play, all of which could link them to satisfying, mutually supportive relationships with others who share their sense of purpose—artist, parent, gardener, iconoclast, construction worker, hospice volunteer. This would be similar to the multiple roles one plays in a family, even if each member has one main avocation or role.

In *The Sociological Tradition*, Robert A. Nisbet defines community as that which “encompasses all forms of relationship which are characterized by a high degree of personal intimacy, emotional depth, moral commitment, social cohesion, and continuity in time. Continuity is founded on man conceived in his wholeness rather than in one or another of the roles, taken separately, that he may hold in a social order” (qtd. in Redekop, *Mennonite* 129). The word “community” in Nisbet’s definition could be switched for “family” and his thoughts would still make sense.

Healthy families are able to sustain an array of different individuals with varying personalities, strengths and weaknesses. Families who feel love and mutual trust also tend to have a high degree of tolerance for diversity. Disagreements happen, but they are transcended. Life goes on. But, bonded by love and shared experiences, the members don't walk out on each other.

My way of loving the Mennonite church may not always sound like love, but it is comparable to the way I love my family and my husband, and even myself. Family, husband, self, and church are people who have been

given to me, and I to them, to love not as ideals but as they are, which means knowing strengths and weaknesses, sins and virtues, not seeing only the stylized role or ideal of what we think we are or were or ought to be. It involves more than passive seeing; there are responsibilities to work toward mutual growth, bear one another's burdens, and, on occasion, share one another's guilt. If we have been given to one another at least as much by God as by our own choice, we cannot simply walk away when the situation does not suit; there is as much responsibility involved as privilege or preference. We may not have a right to quit. (Martin 181)

The challenge, in both families and in the larger communities in which families are embedded, is to know when to give individuals the space they need to experience the gift of solitude or another environment entirely. John Howard Yoder describes the dilemma thus:

If I am a Christian at all, what I do is my brother's business. We owe one another counsel and, sometimes, correction and pardon. Yet it is neither possible nor desirable for my brother to be concerned with all that I do. What then is the point where the search for a common mind ends and individual variation and personal responsibility begins? (*Binding*, 6)

For a pro-tolerance answer, Mennonites could reach back to Balthasar Hubmaier, a Bavarian Anabaptist who was burned at the stake in 1528. In a plea for religious tolerance, Hubmaier said dissenters should be “overcome” with “holy knowledge, not angrily but softly.” And if that doesn't work, “then let them be” (qtd. in Klaassen, *Anabaptism* 53).

Episcopal Abbot Andrew Marr points out that “the Bible, especially the New Testament, is not a handbook of rules but an inspiration to the heart,” therefore it is inevitable that biblical readers will derive a range of answers from the scriptures to lifestyle matters, as well as to ethical and political questions (21). A multi-voiced community, as existed in Jesus' day, is not to be feared, but welcomed. This assumes that all community members agree to test their understandings and perceptions against those of other community members, with the scriptures serving as the communal glue and common reference point. Disagreements will always occur, but ideally dissent will be loyal and conflict will result in growth. When outright transgressions occur and harms are done, responsibility for restoring the well-being of all concerned will be a collective undertaking.

To be a member of the church is to commit oneself to a process of ongoing reconciliation, involving both taking responsibility for the other members of the community and being willing to listen and learn from others. (D. Friesen 158)

Duane K. Frisen rejects the shunning custom of the Old Order Mennonites and Amish. He argues that nobody should be cut off from his or her community unless they choose to exclude themselves or behave disruptively, showing no willingness to participate in speaking and listening respectfully based on a shared desire to understand God's will (157).

To use a music analogy, most choirs work best if singers take different parts in an agreed-upon piece and work at beautiful harmonies under the guidance of a trained conductor. Sometimes there might be solos or duets. But music becomes cacophony if every choral member sings his or her individual tune without regard to what the others are doing. In music, as in communities, much effort must be invested to balance the gifts and desires of the individual with the coherence of the overall project.

Lesson 5:

Artists can (and should) reject the post-industrial paradigm of self-absorbed art and instead contribute to the functioning and future of communities that share their basic values.

Since it is not possible for artists to be disconnected from their socio-economic context, it behooves Mennonite artists to carefully consider to which paradigm they are contributing when they distance themselves from fellow Mennonites living in community. Three-quarters of the artists surveyed for this dissertation spoke of tapping their Mennonite heritage for their artistic work. Yet more than half of them were no longer involved with a Mennonite church-community, beyond old ties with family and friends. The majority alluded to the sense that their gifts were suppressed or unappreciated by their original church-community. Many said they were made to feel guilty for not pursuing practical activities to be of service to others, such as social work, teaching or health care. Yet what did the artist-escapees from the Mennonite church give up, and what did they end up embracing, in their quest for more creative freedom?

Even the “estranged” artist needs to find moral identity in and through a network of social obligations and responsibilities: the notion of escape is an illusion, and one with painful consequences. Pluralism means we can no longer rely on tradition or cultural habit to give us our values. But in such a circumstance, it is possible to become value-blind, like a person who is color-blind or tone-deaf. (Gablik 76-77)

Gablik bemoaned artists who “lose the sense of being members of a tradition which transcends both themselves and their contemporaries” (120). She argued that artists end up self-absorbed in the absence of having larger spiritual and social purpose (120).

Undermining or Respecting One’s People

About a quarter of the survey respondents did not mention considerations larger than themselves and their own interests. “This is what I want to be doing—I am being honest to myself,” wrote one Mennonite-raised artist in a response that was typical. Some artists mentioned the greater professional opportunities in cities, without any reference to the psycho-social costs that might be incurred for pursuing those opportunities. Few seemed aware that their departure from their communities of origin—or indeed from any role in the Mennonite world—might be greasing the downward skid of the communities that helped shape them. John L. Ruth presciently argued in 1978 that if Mennonite artists did not contribute to their “covenant community”—if they did not produce “vivid representation of the holy meaning of our identity”—the community was left vulnerable to careless and uncaring attacks, to inexorable erosion, and to eventual assimilation (53).⁴⁵

After reading a half-dozen novels by modern Anabaptist writers and three times as many of their poems, I was left pondering the jaundiced lens worn by many of the writers. My husband, Jim, joined me in this exercise after I read excerpts from *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress* to him while we were on a long car trip. Jim has little in common with the peace-church tradition: he was raised in a fundamentalist church in the deep South, earned his undergraduate degree at the Virginia Military Institute, and was an officer in the Army Reserves when I met him. He now works as an environmental lawyer for the U.S. government. Yet Jim and I had the same reaction to *Mennonite in a Little*

⁴⁵ For more on this viewpoint of Ruth’s, see footnote ? in Chapter 5.

Black Dress—we found it disrespectful and exploitative of the author’s family and home community.⁴⁶ Our disgust was in marked contrast to that of several Mennonite colleagues at EMU, who found the book to be true, funny and harmless. Jim wondered why any Mennonites would accept being held up to ridicule. I wondered whether writers from other threatened minority groups—native Americans, indigenous Fijians, Palestinian Christians, Norwegian Laplanders—were writing “tell-all” exposés about the families that had loved them and the communities that had nurtured them. It seemed an unlikely tact in the face of the precariousness of these minority communities.⁴⁷

Thirty-one years before the publication of *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress*, Ruth commented on the packaging and selling of Mennonites “in the marketplace of literary sensation”:

[The protagonist] is. . . poised for his agonized quest of authentic being that will drive him through a series of colorful trysts with Mennonite coeds, conveniently sharing his eagerness to be disburdened of moribund inhibitions. Thus will they exorcise, if they are true to their best-selling precedents, the falsely ascetic, intolerable myth of the *Martyrs Mirror*, sequel by sequel outperforming their honest profanity and compulsive lubricity while they pursue an increasingly aimless war against hypocrisy. (*Mennonite* 96)

Resisting the modern trend to disregard (or even attack) people’s sensibilities in producing art, photographer Howard Zehr argues that photographers owe it to their subjects to treat them with care. “It helps to remember. . . that all photographs are a kind of exchange or collaboration. And when we collaborate, we have obligations—to treat all respectfully, to be accountable to our subjects” (72).

Sculptress Esther Augsburg is among a minority of Mennonite-raised artists (judging by my survey) who explicitly draw a link between their creations and serving others:

⁴⁶ *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress* pertains to Mennonite-Brethrens in California, who constitute a stream in the Anabaptist world that is somewhat different from the members of the Mennonite Church USA, the focus of my dissertation. This difference does not negate the point I am making here about the cynical marketing of the Mennonite story.

⁴⁷ Wrote John L. Ruth: “‘Black is beautiful,’ our black brothers and sisters have learned to say. . . . But do we ever hear, ‘Plain is beautiful?’ . . . We hear, instead, ‘Plain is narrow, plain is ugly, plain is heartless.’” (58)

I produce art not only for art's sake but for people's sake. As a Christian I do have a certain obligation to the persons viewing my work. I cannot agree with those artists who feel their work must exist totally apart from the people around them. . . . No person is a vacuum. The work I produce and present to the public is indeed an extension of a very personal “me” and I must be true to this. . . . As a Christian artist I must operate with love and respect for the people for whom my work is meant, for the materials I use, for the subject or means of expression I choose, and for the truth I wish to express and for the One whom I serve. (17)

Excellence in the Service of What?

If an artist rejects the practices and aesthetics of his or her minority culture, it likely means adopting those of the dominant culture since art does not exist in a vacuum. “Excellence” is not a neutral standard. The question needs to be, “excellence in the service of what?”

A high aesthetic standard by itself certainly does not guarantee moral sensitivity. The Nazis are a prime example of an idolatrous aestheticism divorced from the moral life. The Nazis loved classical music and even brought Jews together to play for them, while treating the Jews as vermin. (D. Friesen 182)

Questioning the dominant culture was a central focus of the Georg Lukacs's “Sunday Circle,” a group of writers, poets, composers, and critics who met in Budapest prior to World War I. They wanted to resist what they viewed as the materialistic, utilitarian nature of the post-industrial world. They sought answers in the art of pre-modern cultures.

They were fascinated by primitivism and folk cultures. In primitive African masks, in Chinese paintings, and in the still unspoiled folk music and poetry of the Irish, East European, and Russian peasantry, they thought to have discovered the sense of personal wholeness and communal rootedness they so bitterly lacked in the modern world. (Rubin 38)

Ironically, these Hungarian intellectuals probably would have been fascinated by the modern Mennonites, with their lingering attachments to communal beliefs and practices, such as group-produced quilts of great beauty sold to raise money for relief projects.

Embracing Mennonite Artists

Returning to Lesson 4, more than a few of the surveyed Mennonite artists voiced the thought that they were driven away from the Mennonite church by its lack of respect for the gifts they had, for the talents and fresh insights they might have been able to offer. This theme arises too often for it to be a figment of over-sensitive imaginations or the disgruntled hindsight of artists enamored by post-modern individualism. Clearly, far too many Mennonite church-communities have been blind to the value of the arts.

Three decades ago Ruth called for “God’s nature” to be seen in artists’ “capacities for delicacy, powerful play of the imagination, inventiveness, curiosity or strenuous response to beauty.” For the church to suppress artistic gifts and cause them to atrophy is akin, Ruth said, to living in unheated caves because fire can get out of control. “It is even, sadly, a kind of handing God’s gifts back unused” (*Mennonite* 36-37).

If more than half of the artists emerging from Mennonite communities continue to abandon them, they are essentially cutting themselves off from their roots. They are leaving these communities weaker—more vulnerable to disappearing—and are ensuring that their own children will not have such roots to tap. Their original communities, however, must recognize the value of minority viewpoints and practices within their midst, including those of their most creative members. The church should not fear artistic whirlpools amid the main current, though it also must take care not to get lost in a particular whirlpool.

Lesson 6:

Invest in a like-minded community for the sake of the next generation or two.

What about the children? Where do Mennonites land on this matter? Amos Hoover, an Old Order Mennonite, stifled his longing for a higher education partly because he feared it would have jeopardized his family. He felt his children and grandchildren might have ended up outside his church-community, which he called “too high a price to pay” (J. Miller 210). Hoover understood the dominant culture’s impatience with traditional communities like his own and its disregard for wisdom received from past generations, including religious guidance.

In contrast to Hoover, none of the Mennonite artists in my survey referred to how their religious and lifestyle decisions might impact their grandchildren. A handful mentioned their children. One of these was a playwright in the northwest. He stayed away from attending a Mennonite church for twenty years after witnessing a nasty church split. He returned because he wanted his children to know the kind of community he experienced during his years at a Mennonite college.

In post-industrial America there is little sense that the older generation has anything to offer the young, as apparent in the proliferation of TV shows and movies portraying the imbecility of parents and the relative smartness of their children. There is no consensus on what the young should know about living life in a socially constructive way, beyond the ability to do math, preferably to the level of calculus, and identify presumably important facts on standardized tests. Acquiring the age-old “virtues” discussed in Chapter 4—such as faith, hope, love, patience, gentleness, temperance, prudence and self-control—is simply not a priority in mainstream America. The concept of living righteously seems old-fashioned, undermining one’s freedom to do whatever one chooses, assuming one remains within the bounds of court-enforced laws.

Given the divide between the multi-generational, church-focused families of traditional Mennonite society and the nuclear-sized, mass-media-focused families common in general society, the lack of emphasis on the fate of one’s descendants among the Mennonite artists indicates their shift to the general family pattern. In insular faith-based communities—or ethnic ones for that matter—there seems to be an abiding concern about whether the children and grandchildren will stay in the community.

In *The Gift of Asher Lev*, the novel most similar to his own life, Chaim Potok wrote about a gifted painter (Asher) who normally lived with his wife and two children in France, far from his childhood Hasidic community in Brooklyn, New York. In this excerpt, the painter and his wife Devorah have returned to visit his family in Brooklyn and the visit has been extended longer than Asher would like. He wants to go back to France where he maintains the Hasidic persona but lives in a secular community. Devorah wants to remain in Brooklyn for the sake of the children, as this dialogue indicates:

Devorah and I sat alone in the living room. “It feels good here,” she said...

I was quiet.
“The children love it here. There is community here.”
I said nothing.
“Hello. Are you there? Is anybody there?”
“A crazy artist is here,” I said.
“And here sits his wife, trying to talk to him.”
“I went for a walk today and saw where I grew up.”
“Ah, yes? And how did you feel about it?”
“I felt so-so. Somewhere between nothing and forlorn. I felt ready to go home.”

Upon learning that his young son has been identified as the next Rebbe (esteemed spiritual leader), Asher feels increasingly reluctant to violate the wishes of his wife, children, parents, and home community, whose religion still matters to him. He also thinks Devorah might be right—the children will fare better if surrounded by his extended family and tight-knit community. But he himself cannot bear to conform to his community’s narrow views on art. He departs alone for France, feeling bereft without his loved ones, though he will return to visit them.

Hasidic communities, as well as traditional Mennonite ones, appear conducive to child-rearing. Unlike the memories expressed by Esther Royer Ayers in *Rolling Down Black Stockings—A Passage Out of the Older Order Mennonite Religion*, the childhood memories of most of the Mennonite artists in my survey seemed positive. In fact, only three artists specifically referred to having an unhappy childhood. One of those with the happy memories wrote about returning to her childhood homeplace, surrounded by elderly, loving relatives, to recover from the turbulence of her unmoored life in a high-pressure urban setting. After becoming psychically healed, she resumed her secular, urban lifestyle. She now has children. To what group of loving relatives—to what homeplace—will these children and their children feel linked? The elderly, loving relatives are invested in maintaining a Mennonite church-community, but the artist and her husband are not, nor will their children be in all likelihood.

In 1989 Mennonite sociologists J. Howard Kauffman and Leo Driedger found that “the first generation of higher status, urban Mennonites may have sufficient religious commitment and community supports to combat countervailing forces.” But they wondered, “Will this also be the case several generations later?” (99)

Composer-conductor Alice Parker, who is not Mennonite, praises the Mennonite tradition of raising children to live by non-materialistic standards. “How can we guard our young people from the seductions of this loud, colorful, and heedless society? By turning more and more deeply into the heart of our tradition and continually asking, ‘What really matters? How should we spend our lives?’” (E. Miller 65)

As covered in Chapter 8, we need close interactions with others to live healthily and to come to full fruition.

The study of positive psychology suggests that being involved in something larger than personal self creates a sense of meaning and well-being—an essential part of the experience of “happiness.” . . . [Science has shown that] we are built to be a “we”—and enter a more fulfilling state, perhaps a more natural way of being, when we connect in meaningful ways with others. A living organism links its differentiated parts—and without this integration, it suffers and dies. (Siegel 259)

We need to be attached to people who love us. John Bowlby’s research shows that this is particularly true of children. If we and our children are not connected to and loved by like-minded people, the vacuum will be filled by the influences of others.

Ruth notes that parents from minority cultures are portrayed as unreasonably strict and narrow if they attempt to solidify their voice and influence by narrowing their children’s range of social experiences and limiting their exposure to countervailing information (*Mennonite* 62). Since both the minority culture and the dominant culture play roles in indoctrinating the younger generation, there is little point in arguing over the existence of indoctrination. Children cannot grow up as if they are white boards with no writing on them. Instead the key questions should be: For what purpose does this indoctrination occur? Is such indoctrination ultimately life-affirming or destructive? To what or whom do we wish our children to be attached?

Raised within a healthy community, children can benefit from overlapping relationships—some of the people they know from church will be parents of schoolmates; products and services will be supplied by church members; neighbors will know that the parents will be glad if they keep an eye out for each other’s kids. Such a supportive network does not have to be Mennonite of course. But outside of small towns where everyone knows everyone, Putnam and other sociologists say a faith-based network is likely to constitute the only functional community in America today.

All enduring communities have rituals that feel like second nature to their members. Parker found such a ritual in the tradition of Mennonites singing together.

In the gathered community [I saw] the power of the song to unite generations and sects and uneasy neighbors. I saw what happened when the chain of song was unbroken: the children learning by joining in with their parents and grandparents in song, which was almost always directed to the Creator. . . . I saw people who sang at all the great and small moments of their lives: not only to celebrate births, weddings and funerals, but at all meals and gatherings. Perhaps this active singing unites people at a level below any spoken creed or belief: it is in our bones and breath. (qtd. in E. Miller 65)

Compare this singing to the commercially produced music downloaded onto iPods by American teenagers today. The teens often sing along with these commercial hits. But the communal aspect of the music is absent, much less the worship aspect. If children are not raised with the music of their minority church-communities (among other familiar rituals and customs), they will not understand that this is part of what glues the community together.

Writer-editor Melanie A. Zuercher asks modern Mennonites to make peace with the stultifying aspects of the traditional Mennonite church and to prize its non-stultifying distinctive attributes.

Symbols are powerful, and not so easily disposed of. . . . They are one of the means by which any group defines itself. We may have discarded, literally or figuratively, coverings and plain coats, but we still need something to help us know who we are.

What sets us Mennonites apart now that so many have left behind the last outward distinctives? One positive thing, I think, is community. . . .

Mennonites seem to have this extraordinary need for companionship of their own kind—or maybe it's just that they have a built-in ability to find it, or, failing that, create it wherever they go. A lot of Mennonites have come full circle back to church, because that's where they find each other—on Sunday morning or at church-related activities like volleyball games, square dances, coffee houses, and potlucks. Weddings, another age-old symbol of community and the celebration thereof, draw people from miles and hours away.

On the more negative side, Mennonites have become distinguished by not being distinguished—by assimilating almost completely into modern culture and its manifestations. . . .

The most serious result of this is its effect on the next generation. Not only our personal lives, but our churches as well, bear alarming resemblance to mainstream society. How will the young Mennonites of

the future know what it means to be Mennonite? Where will they find the community that, for me, is the strongest glue binding me to the church?

I and many of my friends, as well as our parents, found it at Mennonite colleges. Today, I'm puzzled and pained to see Mennonites who have money for the townhouse, the Volvo, the European vacation, but not for sending the children to Mennonite schools, especially colleges, and for supporting those schools in other ways. . . .

To be Mennonite means to be separate in some way, and we have to consider carefully the cost of abandoning every vestige of that separateness. (5)

To reiterate, when Mennonite artists and others leave the church to gain more personal freedom, are they weighing the impact of their decision on their descendants? Will their children attend a Mennonite college to meet other like-minded people and experience living in community, complete with learning how to get long with each other? What social, spiritual and ethical springboard will their children and grandchildren have as they make their way in the larger world as physicians, teachers, social workers, businessmen, or artists? In what community will they find support if their views run counter to the dominant paradigm? If the saying "it takes a village to raise a child" is right, in what village will the descendants of today's Mennonites raise their children?

SUMMARY LESSON, No. 7:

*To survive as examples of a better way of living,
Mennonites need to be committed to church-communities
that hew to agreed-upon biblical values, handle conflicts healthily,
and accept the wide range of members' gifts.*

The modern Mennonite community is in danger. Mennonite artists aren't the only ones leaving the church. At a membership loss of about one percent per year since 1989, many Mennonites from other walks of life are departing and not enough newcomers are taking their places. Sociologists who have studied the shrinkage of the Mennonite church in the United States counted its active members, rather than counting the number of people born to Mennonite parents. These sociologists believe that ethnicity does not determine who is a Mennonite. If you were raised in a Mennonite household of Swiss-

German heritage but now belong to the Roman Catholic church and support the community tied to that church, you are a Roman Catholic rather than a Mennonite.

I have met struggling refugees from Vietnam who are first-generation Mennonites and who exhibit far greater commitment to their church and its teachings than a number of affluent Americans I know who were raised in Mennonite families and maybe even attend a Mennonite church. The Mennonite church-community can only be as strong as those who embrace its fundamental convictions and narratives, traceable back to Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz, George Blaurock, Menno Simons, and others in the early Anabaptist movement.

There are Mennonite congregations, communities, families, and individuals who have sloughed off almost all emotional and ideological commitments to their roots. . . . These individualistic Mennonites pursue conventional occupations, live in urban neighborhoods appropriate to or commensurate with their income levels and general lifestyle, and are generally concerned with upward social mobility and economic security. Though they may still attend Mennonite churches, they are on the way out; with the likely outmarriage of their children, they confirm the cutting of ties with the traditional community. They consider the Mennonite commitment to the peace position and nonconformity undesirable traits, since these marks identify them as being adherents of a deviant group. (Redekop, *Mennonite* 86-87)

Core Mennonite Beliefs and Practices

The Mennonites who seem to be the truest heirs to Grebel and the other early Anabaptists are the ones who facilitate the work of Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). MCC lives out the teachings of Jesus by dispatching volunteers to do development work centered on health, education, peace, and justice for all. MCC relieves suffering in disaster situations. It also tries to address the longer-term issues of economic and social policy, both by promoting fair trade and skill development and by calling attention to the structures that contribute to poverty, injustice and violence. MCC always makes it clear that this work is the way of Jesus.

MCC's backers range from extremely traditional Anabaptists (Amish and Old Order Mennonite groups) to politically leftist, social activist Mennonites. Yet almost all of these Anabaptists—whether Pennsylvania Dutch speakers or relatively new U.S. Mennonites who speak only Spanish—agree on these fundamental principles: living

simply; sharing one's wealth with those lacking; easing suffering; remembering you are here to do God's will, not your own; living in an egalitarian way as brothers and sisters in the body of Christ; and generally trying to do as Jesus did. The Anabaptist heritage that they hold in common shines through their work with MCC.

Tradition, then, is the source of strong convictions. It is through caring about these convictions that we can build community; but, as I have noted, the ambiguities in a rich tradition can cause conflict and divisions as well. It is important for us to love our tradition, but it is also important for us to love the people who share it. (Marr 22)

Maintaining the Mennonite "House"

While traditions are important, it is neither healthy nor even possible to maintain tall, impermeable walls around the Mennonite tradition. If the Mennonite church-community is to continue to be viable, it needs to be a living and growing tradition, not an imprisoned or moribund one. It needs the gifts of the people Paul mentioned in Romans 12 and Corinthians 14, plus the gifts of women and of callings that have come to the fore since Paul's era, such as engineering and art. Metaphorically, the Mennonite "house" has a solid centuries-old foundation, but it needs functioning windows and doors. Coming and going must be allowed. Visitors and short-timers should be welcomed, and fresh opinions aired. Conflicts must be understood as part of living under one roof and treated as growth opportunities for all concerned. There must be room in this communal home to doubt, make a mistake, search, experiment, draw close and move away, and return again—and always to be received with open arms.

The cornerstone of the house should remain what it was from the days of the first Anabaptists: free choice. A person must freely choose to be under the Mennonite roof. Being part of the household should neither be automatic (as a birthright), nor coerced in any way. Even subtle versions of shunning are forms of coercion.

The shared values of a community should be freely embraced by each member. Each individual must take personal responsibility for his embracing the corporate beliefs. At the same time, there are bound to be some differences in the way these values are understood and applied by each member. These differences can be either a revitalizing force for the community or a destructive one. Here is the point where freedom can be lost either by stifling any deviation from one rigid set of norms or by losing all cohesiveness. We must seek a way that allows for both freedom and stability. (Marr 22)

This concept of voluntary, not coerced, association represents one of the laudatory advances of post-modern society. It can be found in organizations as various as Alcoholics Anonymous, the Masonic orders, Weight Watchers, and the current all-volunteer U.S. military forces. Their members accept the standards and guidelines necessary for the functioning of their respective groups, with the understanding that behaviors that do not affect that group are left to the member's discretion. So it should be with the Mennonite church.

Accountability and Commitment

Part of choosing to join a Mennonite church-community is agreeing to practice mutual accountability as is practiced in healthy families. It is also agreeing to remain committed to the community even when there are the inevitable disagreements and difficult times—again, as is done in most marriages and families. Most of us readily understand that we cannot simply quit if we have committed ourselves to holding the lead in a stage production, serving in the U.S. military for a specific period of time, or signing a teaching contract, even if we disagree with our director, commanding officer or school-system colleagues. A similar level of commitment may be harder to muster when it is motivated by spiritual values and goals rather than a legal agreement. This is especially true in a society that puts high value on contracts and the income and productivity resulting from them but little value on living out one's faith without regard to material benefit. Yet commitment is as essential to maintaining a church-centered community as it is to maintaining a standing army.

The way to ensure that “accountability” and “commitment” don't morph into cult-like control is for church-community members to accept that they are fallible—that they may hope to understand God's will, but only God knows for sure—and to treat each other with a large dose of biblical grace. One of the early sixteenth-century Swiss Anabaptists, Pilgram Marpeck, left writings in which he argued at length that Christians should not hastily judge each other.

The image he [Marpeck] uses is that of the flower and the fruit. Judgment ought not to be made on the basis of the leaves or blossom but left until the fruit appears. That is to say, allowance must be made for growth in Christian discipleship. A new disciple may not be able to shed past habits all at once. Much of what appears to be repudiation of Christ is in fact

only a temporary lapse from which, with the proper love and concern on the part of his fellow disciples, a person will quickly recover. Patience with what appears to be error is the ark in which all the treasures of God's grace are stored, wrote Marpeck. (Klaassen *Anabaptism* 32)

Personal and Church Transformation

In my survey, the Mennonite artists who were older than 30 often spoke of the way their relationship with the Mennonite church had changed over the years. One writer who moved away from his home community in anger over its negative reception to one of his first works, found himself 20 years later musing on the realization that this early piece was indeed “immature” and probably unnecessarily vulgar and obscene. He has re-established contact with the community he left and now taps it for material for his writings.

Many of the artists who do not plan to reconnect with a Mennonite church-community—often because they have married non-Mennonites and live distant from any kind of Mennonite fellowship—spoke of a gap in their lives.

Before I moved here [to the west coast] 19 years ago, I had always lived in a Mennonite community and went to Mennonite high school and college. I felt it would be a good experience for me to live in an urban setting and really did want to escape the fish-bowl feeling of living in such a close-knit community. So, at first it was exciting and new and somewhat of a relief. However, over the years I have really come to miss the Mennonite church and the people and feel I have never found again the kind of unique community that makes up the Mennonites.

Those artists who left and returned often seem surprised that the Mennonite church evolved in their absence. The church issues that seemed so important at the time of their departure—what type of music or drama might be permissible, what constitutes humble and simple clothing, the acceptance of unwed mothers or divorced persons—had been settled and new issues then arose, such as the probity of homosexual relationships.

Schlabach, who is familiar with both the monastic life of the Roman Catholic church and the community life of Mennonites, advises Christians to view participating in community as an adventure, as an exciting growth opportunity.

Community life is as much a quest as any individual life. Living a meaningful life as part of a healthy community involves participating in that community's larger project—to discover, debate, test, and embody the

community's vision of what it means to thrive as human beings in the first place, its vision of “the good.” (205)

Schlabach also stresses that feeling disappointed with one’s church at times is par for the course: “A Christian who has not been disappointed by the church is either maintaining a courageous front, deceiving herself, or is still new enough to Christianity to be enjoying the honeymoon phase of church life” (110). It is inevitable that there will be times when church members will need to ponder and pray over whether it is in the best interests of the community for them to keep their own counsel or to openly or quietly dissent.

Just as musicians need to be able to play the scales and painters should know how to mix colors, community members need to possess the basic skills necessary for navigating through turbulent periods in the community’s life.

There will be dissension in the best of communities. But in vital communities, cooperation, compromise, and consensus building will be widely shared pursuits. . . . The skills necessary to the resolution of group conflict should be taught in both high school and college. All men and women in positions of leadership, government or private sector should be schooled in dispute resolution and all of the antipolarization arts (Gardner, “Building” 42).

Conflict-transformation skills and effective group decision-making are particularly important in faith-based communities, where participants might be tempted to assert that they represent the “word of God” rather than their personal view. “Consensus takes much time to reach,” Schlabach observes. “Good intentions and the initial romance of community life wane. Patience frays, and righteous conviction turns to anger” (102). But if members are versed in the challenges of group process, they can emerge feeling joy over successfully traversing a tough spot. They may even decide that the path ultimately taken was better than any of the original ones proposed.

Passing Along Wisdom

If the modern Mennonite church-community in America survives to the twenty-second century, it may be thanks to the existence of five colleges and two seminaries under the umbrella of the Mennonite Education Agency of the Mennonite Church USA. In the spring 2009 issue of the EMU alumni magazine, university president Loren Swartzendruber wrote that the best predictor of someone being active in a Mennonite

church as an adult is attending a Mennonite college. Pastors trained in one of the Mennonite seminaries are more likely to stand firm on the theological points where Mennonites diverge from mainstream America, such as opposition to humans killing humans for any reason. Attending a Mennonite college rather than some other kind of college results in twice as much Bible knowledge (along with a less fundamentalist view of the Bible) and twice as much knowledge of Anabaptism. Mennonite college graduates also participate more in churches, are more committed to pacifism, and have a greater sense of communalism (Kauffman and Driedger 136).

Perhaps the colleges and seminaries are playing the roles that were once played by multi-generational families living in communities with a deep sense of historical memory and purpose. Maybe the seeds of wisdom are being planted by the Mennonite educational institutions rather than by blood relatives, close neighbors, lay pastors, and one-room schoolhouse teachers. Suzi Gatlik says that “tradition teaches wisdom.” But where are the storehouses of traditional Anabaptist knowledge these days? Could they be in the Mennonite institutions of higher education? Perhaps it is here that discussion can flower on such matters as Mennonite “individualism versus conformity” and “freedom versus limitation.” Speaking from a non-Mennonite art scholar’s perspective, Gablik writes:

The final lesson of modernism may be no more than this: that we need a fruitful tension between freedom and restraint. The concept of the good is necessarily bound up with the concept of observing a limit. Perhaps after a long phase of rebelliously throwing out everything, we are more able to recognize that what is most acutely missing now is a sense of limits. Since immunity from the responsibility of tradition has itself become a tradition, perhaps we can go forward from the point we have reached by also going back, with a new knowledge of how form, structure, and authority sustain the spirit and enable us to live our lives with more vision; they are a necessary condition of our well-being. (127-128)

Extrapolating Gablik’s comments to the modern family, most of us would agree that healthy families must balance members’ individual needs and wants with those of the family as a whole. Each member operates under some kind of restraint. Dad is not supposed to run off with his administrative assistant. Mom cannot choose to ignore the hunger of her nursing baby. The 10-year-old daughter is not permitted to wander the streets all night on her own. The 14-year-old son is not allowed to go to a beer-drinking

party with his friends. And nobody is supposed to spend more money than the family has coming in. These might be considered minimal standards.

For more than minimal standards, especially if those standards are different than those of the dominant culture, families need others who share their views and can reinforce them. That's the basic definition of a community. But a community that can sustain itself, year after year, generation after generation, passing along its values in the form of shared liturgies, prayers, songs, foods, rituals, narratives, and memories of suffering and resilience, along with ways to live out those values in the here and now—that is a rare treasure indeed. That is the community of Mennonite-style Christians. It is still in existence today and, one hopes, for generations to come.

APPENDIX A: The Russian Stream of Mennonites

In *Power, Authority, and the Anabaptist Tradition*, Jacob Loewen and Wesley Prieb describe a social phenomenon that will seem familiar to modern-day Americans and somewhat reminiscent of the Netherlands in the Golden Age—the authors describe the gradual accumulation of power and wealth in the hands of an elite group of Mennonites at the expense of the average community member.

It started when the Mennonite settlers displaced the nomadic tribes roaming the steppes of the Ukraine. These tribes, in turn, preyed on the settlers. The Mennonites appealed to the Russian authorities for protection, and this protection often resulted in violent floggings and killings of the offenders, as well as of innocent tribesmen, to teach the entire tribe a lesson. Eventually, the czar granted the colonists the power to set up their own civil authority for their colonies. They were able to levy taxes, grant travel documents, enforce law and order, and issue orders for communal labor. In short, the regional Mennonite authorities “provided all the necessary functions of civil government” (96).

“When the Mennonites were given a mandate to govern themselves in the colonies and to become a ‘development engine’ for the country, the former victims of persecution embarked on a new road” (96). This proved to be a road away from their previous pilgrimage of seeking religious freedom and basic human rights; instead they traveled toward a stratified class society with economic, political, and religious power vested in a privileged minority that controlled both church and state (102).

The Russian Mennonite colonies splintered into three social classes: the landless peasants (“by the mid-nineteenth century more than two-thirds of all the Mennonites in Russia were landless”) (97); the small plot-owning peasants; and the estate owners (amounting to 3 percent of the Mennonite population) and owners of businesses serving the estates (101).

The estate owners often aligned themselves with their Russian noble counterparts and became part of the oppressive system of Russian land-ownership (99). By 1914, two-fifths of all flour and feed mills in Russia were located in the south, largely on Mennonite

lands. By 1914, eight Mennonite manufacturers were producing 10 percent of the Russian farm machinery (99-100).

The unhappiness of landless serfs, together with the urban worker dissatisfaction, eventually produced both the 1905 and 1917 revolutions (Krahn and Sawatsky, pars. 1-8). The Mennonites, considered to be ethnic foreigners and part of the prevailing power structure, were singled out as targets by the revolutionaries and by Stalin in particular (pars. 1-4).

Mennonites in North America

From 1874-1880, one-third of all Mennonites from Russia moved to the United States and Canada in reaction to the introduction of compulsory military service and increased efforts at obliterating their religious and cultural heritage (Krahn and Sawatsky, par. 15). Another wave came in the decade after the Russian Revolution and World War I. The Mennonites who did not manage to emigrate faced severe oppression and forced dispersion, including exile in Siberian prison camps. Being Christians of German heritage in a rabidly atheistic authoritarian state, Mennonites were always under suspicion (pars. 18-22). With the help of the Canadian railroad companies (which had tracts of western land for which they needed settlers), the Mennonites coming from Russia gravitated toward the western provinces of Canada (C. Klassen, par. 2), though some headed toward inexpensive farmland in the prairie states (Bender, *United States* par. 5).

Today in the United States and Canada, it is possible to detect lingering differences among the descendants of the Mennonites of Dutch and northern German origin, who arrived by way of eastern Europe, Ukraine and Russia, and those Mennonites who migrated earlier directly from Switzerland and southern Germany (par. 13). Some of the Russians formed the General Conference of the Mennonite *Brethren* Church in 1879, a branch of Anabaptism that took root in the mid- and far-west of the United States, as well as in western Canada (Lohrenz, par. 2). (The particular practices and composition of the Mennonite-Brethrens are beyond the scope of this study.)

Others found a home in the “General Conference” Mennonite group, which predominated among Mennonite farming communities in the prairie states (North and

South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Minnesota). The Anabaptists of largely Swiss-German-heritage comprised the largest conference, simply called “The Mennonite Church,” with the bulk of it situated east of the Mississippi (Bender, *United States*, par. 2), especially in the mid-Atlantic region.

By the early twentieth century, the General Conference Mennonites in the western states tended to resemble their Protestant neighbors, partaking of art, movies, instrumental and recorded music, and organized sports competitions—certainly, more so than those in the more conservative Mennonite Church congregations toward the east, which tended to maintain a non-conformist stance.⁴⁸ Despite these cultural differences, the two national conferences joined forces with other Anabaptist branches in 1920 to create what grew to be a globally oriented relief organization, Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) (Bender and Neufeld, par. 5). To this day, MCC remains a success story and a vibrant focus of Anabaptist collaboration.

⁴⁸ In a series of *Crossroads* issues published 2009-11, I (as the writer-editor) explored the blossoming of intercollegiate sports, the visual arts, the arts of theater and film, and music at Eastern Mennonite University (EMU), a university embedded in what was then simply called the Mennonite Church. In all cases, EMU lagged decades behind the General Conference colleges (i.e., Bethel in Kansas and Bluffton in Ohio) in accepting these fields as legitimate pursuits. Referring to the Mennonite Church group, John D. Roth wrote in 1990: “In the 1940s and 1950s, Mennonites who wanted to remain faithful members of the church did not ‘dance, drink, smoke, chew or date those who do’; Mennonites did not go to county fairs or to school dances; they were strict observers of the Sabbath who did not listen to the radio, visit theaters, join labor unions, invest in common stock or mingle with fraternal organizations. Mennonite men wore plain coats, Mennonite women wore prayer veilings” (16).

APPENDIX B: Survey Questions Posed to Mennonite Artists

A. As a Mennonite artist, do you feel you have experienced pressure to conform to your Mennonite community of origin to the point of affecting your ability to be creative and/or artistic? Please explain your “no” or “yes” answer.

(If you answered “no,” please skip to Question B after explaining your answer. If you answered “yes,” please include an answer to the following question in your explanation.)

—What, if any, steps did you take to reduce the pressure to conform and/or to increase your freedom to create as you wished?

B. Overall, how do you feel your art has been influenced (or not influenced) by your Mennonite community of origin?

If the artists did not mention their current church affiliation in their responses to the above question—or if their church affiliation was not already known—they were asked about this in a follow-up question.

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