

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship

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Given by Loretta Willems

Adapted from her family history memoir

The Gift of Laughter: The Story of a California Mennonite Family

Available at Village Books & <http://lorettawillems.wordpress.com>

A Mennonite Story

I was not a Mennonite when I was a child. My parents left the church early in their marriage, and I grew up as just another little California girl like all the other little girls in my neighborhood. And when I turned six, it became a world of school—the liberal, progressive California public schools, whose dedicated teachers, might all have been Unitarians, given their passionate belief in Democracy, civic service and the innate goodness of all humanity.

Religion for me then was a matter of being sent to the nearest Protestant Sunday school on Sunday mornings; being kind, honest and understanding; saying, “Now I lay me down to sleep” at night and going to the nearby Lodi Mennonite Brethren Church on Christmas Eve and Easter morning. I liked going to church. Taking time to put on my best clothes and gather with other people all dressed in their best seemed to give a significance to Sundays and holidays that other days did not have. --Mennonite, Unitarian, Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian—they were all the same to me as a child. I knew my grandparents were Mennonites, but my parents belonged to no church, so neither did I. We were simply generic Protestants.

And yet, looking back as an adult, I can see that the foundation of my Mennonite identity goes back way before I had any sense of myself as Mennonite, back to my earliest memories and the experience of being part of a large extended family. There were ten children in my mother’s family, fourteen in my dad’s, and this huge family was filled with aunts and uncles in their teens and twenties: aunts with pretty figures who would let me explore their closets and try on their high-heeled shoes; handsome young uncles who would throw me up in the air, toss me back and forth between themselves. My aunts and uncles laughed and teased and sang. My dad and his brothers formed impromptu quartettes. His sisters sang in trios, singing close harmony like the Andrews sisters. They were vibrant, full of laughter and stories about the crazy things they had done:

Behind all this drama and adventure was the vague presence of the Mennonite Brethren church and its discipline, a background that seemed to take part in the action. The drinking, the movies and dancing—even the lipstick and makeup that made my mom and aunts so pretty—defied church discipline. I heard the words “hypocrites” and “money grabbers” used when the family spoke about people in the church. I heard anger in my parents’ and aunts’ and uncles’ voices when they talked about the Mennonite Brethren.

Of all that huge family, only my grandparents and a couple of my dad’s sisters still belonged to the church in those years of my childhood, yet somehow the Mennonite connection

was still there, continued to affect all our lives, remained part of the family identity. We attended the Lodi MB church every Christmas Eve and every Easter without fail, and I could tell that my parents liked the people at the Lodi church. They eagerly joined the crowd of people gathered under the big walnut trees in front of the church on Easter mornings. I saw how they laughed and visited, saw how they lingered afterward and talked until the crowd had dwindled down to just the group clustered around my parents. I, too, liked the people at the church. They were warm and comfortable and kind—I put a question mark beside my dad’s words about Mennonites being hypocrites and money-grabbers.

The Willems family was Mennonite. I was Loretta *Willems* so that meant that I was somehow connected to the Mennonites as well. But in my childhood the connection was one of family history. I, personally, was not a Mennonite, nor were Mom and Dad. They had repudiated Mennonite identity. They were *ex-Mennonites*. Holiday visits were nice, but they were just that—“visits.” They had absolutely no intention of ever again living within Mennonite church discipline.

The emotional power of the church in my parents’ lives had not been erased, however, just shoved down. Just after my thirteenth birthday, that repressed power burst through the barriers my parents had erected, rushed out and engulfed our whole family. I suddenly found that I, too, was going have to wrestle with the Mennonite Brethren Church.

A great curtain seems to hang between the memories of my childhood, separating pre- from the post-revival—a dividing line like that on the earth viewed from space, the line between day and night. For my parents, the revival returned them to the world in which their lives had originally taken shape and form. It was a return to a moral universe that felt true and right, to beliefs and language that had deep meaning grounded in the time before memory. My parents had grown up in a world saturated by the words and stories of the Bible, stories of miracles, angels, demons, heaven and hell—each word of the Bible seen as individually uttered by God. Even though they’d left the church early in their marriage to live in secular American culture, that original language and belief system still felt real and true to them. And like most parents, they assumed that a language and ideas that felt true to them would be equally real to their children.

What they didn’t realize, however, was that their older daughter had come to consciousness in the very different secular culture of school, movies, radio. To me, the world of the Bible was no more real than fairy tales or Greek myths. I believed in God and heaven, but, other than that, the science and reason I learned at school formed the basis of my understanding. For me, my parents’ conversion was **not** a homecoming; it was entry into an alien new universe.

I still lived in the same house, the same town, but everything else seemed to have been overturned. And it wasn’t just a matter of strange new ideas. The rules by which my family lived in the world outside our house had also changed. Things I had done all my life, things I had enjoyed, like movies and dancing, suddenly became “wrong.”

With my original sense of reality shattered, a depression settled on my life that would be with me for many years. But world-building is a human necessity, and slowly I began to rebuild mine. This new Mennonite world was not all bad. I loved the people at church, and I liked going there on Sunday mornings. Getting dressed up, going out with my family into the freshness of the day, driving the thirteen miles from Stockton to Lodi, walking under big walnut and sycamore trees up to church, greeting people on the sidewalk and steps. All those old pleasant associations and experiences from my childhood were still there, and they helped in the reconstruction of my life.

I liked being a real member, not just an occasional visitor. I liked the sense of intimacy and belonging, the feeling of fellowship. The people at church felt like family, *my* family. I became interested in all things Mennonite, my ears alert for news and information about Mennonite people, churches, and schools. My family made visits to MB churches in other towns; MB people from other towns and states visited us in our home. Choirs and quartettes from Mennonite schools visited our church. People who had visited Mennonite colonies in South America showed 8 mm movies of the people and their villages on Sunday evenings.

Mennonites were all over the world. I began to get a sense of myself as more than American. Mennonite identity replaced national identity. We were a pilgrim people whose primary loyalty was to God. I was born in the U.S.; my parents had been born in Canada; my grandparents had been born in Europe. I felt lucky to have been born in the U.S., but living here felt accidental. I would be me wherever I lived. I could be at home wherever there were Mennonites: South America, Europe, Africa, India, Japan . . .

If given half a chance I would have stayed in that Mennonite world, married a Mennonite boy, reared a Mennonite family of my own. However, when I was a junior in high school, my father decided to start a Skid Row Rescue Mission in Phoenix, Arizona, a place where there were no Mennonite Brethren churches. The church we attended in Phoenix was an independent Bible Church. The girls who became my friends and the boys I dated were part of its large youth group. Seventeen months after the move to Phoenix, I married one of those boys. Eleven months later I gave birth to the first of my two children. Nineteen months after her birth, a second daughter completed our family.

My Mennonite identity faded a bit during the years I lived in Phoenix, but it never completely faded. Then, in 1960, my husband and I decided to move to Monroe, Washington, a town that had a Mennonite church. We visited that church and fell in love with the people and their pastor. And it was there in a book I found on the shelves of the pastors library that I found the story the permanently stamped the word Mennonite on my soul.

The Story of the Mennonites

The book I found in the study of the pastor of the Monroe Mennonite Church that Sunday evening back when I was in my early twenties, was written by an academically trained Mennonite historian, C. Henry Smith. Reading his *Story of the Mennonites*, I was surprised to find that the Mennonite people reach all the way back to the earliest years of the Protestant Reformation in Europe, to the early 1520s and the most radical of the Reformers—the Anabaptists. These radical reformers insisted upon principles we now take for granted as obviously right—individual freedom of conscience and the separation of church and state. This radical position came from their reading of the Bible. What they saw in the New Testament was not a state church, but a church that was voluntary, a free, independent religious organization composed of adults baptized after a deliberate decision to take on the difficult demands of Christian discipleship, a discipleship that took literally the command to love one’s enemies and to refuse to return evil for evil. Because of that command they refused to take up the sword in the service of the state; they even refused to defend their own lives, or the lives of those they loved—beliefs that were swiftly put to the test.

Lutheran, Calvinist and Catholic rulers saw these defenseless Christians’ insistence on adult baptism as a threat to social and political order, and they acted quickly to stamp out this dangerous belief. Anabaptist men and women, leaders and ordinary believers, were “broken on the rack, thrown into rivers and lakes, burned at the stake, beheaded and buried alive.”ⁱ Fifteen hundred of these terrible deaths were recorded in an illustrated collection of martyr stories printed in Holland in 1660. That number is now considered conservative. Persecution effectively eliminated the Anabaptist movement in most of Europe. Those who survived lived as fugitives, taking refuge wherever they could find it. Taking advantage of every toe-hold they could find, these people of radical faith managed to maintain an embattled presence in Switzerland, the Netherlands, and the lands along the Rhine River. In the Netherlands they found the leader, Menno Simons, from whose name the word, “Mennonite” comes.

Amish people and the horse and buggy Mennonites of Pennsylvania are descendants of Mennonites from Switzerland and the upper Rhine. My family descends from Dutch Mennonites who found refuge in the Vistula River delta in what is now Poland. Artisans and farmers, these Netherlanders knew how to turn swampland into productive farms, skills that made them valuable to Delta landowners. Granted protection because of their economic worth, they were allowed to maintain their distinctive beliefs, but were forbidden to take converts or marry into the local population. Here in the delta, after initial severe hardship in which it is estimated that up to 80% of the first generation of settlers died of “swamp fever,” they prospered and increased.

Prosperity and increased population, however, were not an unmixed blessing. The Mennonites’ prosperity and rejection of military service bred resentment among the local population. Pressure was put on governing authorities, and laws were enacted forbidding

Mennonites to acquire new land. Families could no longer provide farms for all their children, and a landless class developed within the Mennonite community.

Then in 1786, an agent of Catherine the Great of Russia, seeking Germanic settlers for land just north of the Black Sea that she had recently taken from the Ottoman Empire, approached the Vistula Mennonites with enticing offers of free land, exemption from military service, the privilege of limited self-governance and financial help in the resettlement process. In the following half-century about half the Vistula Mennonite population migrated to the steppes of what is now Ukraine. Here again, in this new land, after initial severe hardship they prospered, a people originating in Holland, with Dutch names, who had become part of German language culture during their 200-year sojourn in the Vistula delta.

The privileged relationship with the Russian government that the Mennonite colonies enjoyed proved impermanent. In the 1850s the reigning czar, Alexander II, began a program of "Russification." Pressure was put on Mennonites and other minority groups to assimilate with the Russian population. Mennonite schools were put under Russian supervision; exemption from military service was threatened. The Mennonites of south Russia began to look for a new land. They found it in the prairies of North America. A new migration began. In the period between 1873 and 1884, 18,000 Mennonites—about half the population of the Russian colonies—left for the virgin prairies of the United States and Canada, taking their Turkey red wheat and knowledge of dry land farming with them. There again, after initial hardship, they prospered and increased. My Willems great-grandparents were part of that migration.

Over half the population, however, stayed in Russia, did not emigrate. The czarist government, alarmed by the mass exodus of valuable farmers decided to allow the Mennonites to substitute forestry and hospital work for regular military service. The Mennonites were allowed to continue governing the internal affairs of their colonies, and the colonies prospered. Secondary schools and hospitals were established. Mennonite entrepreneurs built large wheat mills and farm implement factories.

This veritable Golden Age of Mennonite culture ended abruptly in 1914 when Russia entered WWI. All of Russia suffered terribly in the years that followed. War with Germany was followed by civil war that brought anarchy and violence, disease and famine. In the Ukraine, the Red and White armies fought back and forth across the land. Soldiers confiscated food and livestock. Outlaws roamed the countryside attacking farms and villages, raping, torturing, maiming, killing. Resented for their wealth, suspect because of their German language and separatist culture, Mennonites became special targets, easy targets in the prevailing lawlessness, a situation that intensified with the victory of the Bolsheviks.

In the summer of 1920, Mennonites in North America and the Netherlands concerned about the situation in Russia sent a commission to investigate. What they found were starving people and a land devastated by disease. Drought had struck the war-ravaged lands, and Russia was in the grip of massive famine, one in which millions of Russians would starve to death before it ended in 1924. Mennonites around the world organized to get food into the

Ukraine. They organized soup kitchens, distributed food and clothing, shipped in tractors to replace horses slaughtered for food, provided seed for replanting once the drought ended.

The end of the famine eased the Mennonites' plight. They were no longer starving—but it did not end their troubles. Seen as “kulaks” by the Soviets, their farms were confiscated, their churches and schools seized, their preachers and teachers arrested. Mennonite life in Russia was doomed. All who could escaped—escaped with the help of Mennonites all over the world. U.S., Canadian and Dutch Mennonite leaders negotiated with the Soviets to allow people to leave Russia. They also negotiated with government leaders in North and South America to accept the refugees. Churches raised money to pay for trains and ships to carry the desperate people thousands of miles to the places that were to become their new homes.

Canada accepted 21,000 refugees, Paraguay 3,000. The majority of Mennonites in Russia, however, were not able to escape before the Soviets clamped down and refused any further emigration. The Mennonites who remained in Russia effectively disappeared behind the Soviet wall until the end of WWII when about 35,000 Mennonites followed the German army out of Ukraine. Most of them did not make it to safety. Many died along the way. Others were captured and sent to Siberia. Approximately 12,000 did make it to Germany and found refuge in camps set up by Dutch and North American Mennonites. Half of those refugees were resettled in Paraguay, the other half in Canada.

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Smith's story of the Mennonites stunned me. I'd never heard of the Anabaptists. I knew nothing about the martyrs of the 16th Century. I was completely unaware of the long history of struggle and migration.

My Grandmother Willems was born in Russia in 1893. If her parents had not migrated to Canada in 1903 she would have been caught in the Russian Revolution that devastated the Mennonite colonies. I was this person, Loretta Willems, because of these events. I owed my very existence to the people whose history I read about in Smith's book. This story was *my* story.

Today I would call my reading of C. Henry Smith's book an experience of transcendence—transcendence of individual self, the extension of identity back through time, a sense of myself as not just a private self, but a self inextricably part of the Mennonite people. I did not have language in my early twenties for what I felt. I simply felt awed by what I had read. To be descended from these people felt like a privilege, a great gift that must not be lost or forgotten. Of all the people involved in the bloody years of the Protestant Reformation, they were among the few who did not torture and kill people with whom they differed. That rejection of violence shaped their history and made them a people distinct from the societies in which they lived. *This is what it meant to be Mennonite.*

Those martyrs who gave birth to the Mennonite tradition had the courage to confront their religious heritage, question it and reject that which they found wrong. They had the

audacity to insist that conscience and belief cannot be forced, must not be forced. To be Mennonite meant both claiming and wrestling with one's religious inheritance. C. Henry Smith's *Story of the Mennonites* gave me permission to face my own religious doubts, do my own wrestling. It took several years before I mustered the courage to accept that offer. But when I did, it was with the strong sense that I was being true to those early martyrs and what it meant to be Mennonite.

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Unitarians and Universalists also have a wonderful story, one that like the Mennonite story reaches back to the Protestant Reformation in Europe. Your life in this congregation adds to that story. Your exchanges with the Transylvania Unitarians connect the story you are creating here in Bellingham with the origins of the larger story in which you participate. That is exciting, satisfying.

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<sup>i</sup>C. Henry Smith, *The Story of the Mennonites* 4<sup>th</sup> ed., revised and enlarged by Cornelius Krahn. (Newton, KS: Mennonite Publication Office, 1957).