

Growing up in a Mennonite Community

Ralph C. Martin rmartin@nsac.ca

Presented June 1, 2008 at the UU Church of Halifax

Real decisions mostly passed me by when I was five. Mom wanted me to go with her to Kitchener to see the Queen of England. “What do we do when we see the Queen?” I asked. “We’ll stand on the sidewalk and watch her go by in a big, black convertible and when she sees us, we’ll wave. If we’re lucky the car might stop and she might actually say, ‘How do you do?’”

“Oh-h” I ventured with less enthusiasm than Mom expected for royalty. “If the Queen’s not good enough for you, you can stay here and help in the barn”. “Oh-h-h,” I almost sang, being enough of a diplomat not to increase my voice pitch too much. “Granddad’s hauling manure today”, she said smugly. “Oh, okay, can I help?” My blurt was out and I waited worriedly for her backhand comment. Her silence finally dissolved in a disbelieving hiss of “get ready to go the barn”.

In the barn, pigs grunted as they shifted, cows called to calves, chickens clucked as they scratched in territorial disarray and the billy goat butted against his post, the post that could have been me. However, the horses’ hooves on the cement floor and the reluctant squeaking manure spreader they dragged, alerted the barn chorus. Today as I listen to Gregorian chants, I recall granddad’s version. ‘Hup, hup, hup, easy now, hup, hup, hup’ he intoned while luring the barn chorus from cacophony to calm, monosyllabic vocalizations.

Granddad handed my fork to me and turned to load the manure spreader with his own fork. Did he smile as he turned, even just a twitch, at the corner of his mouth? I was sure I detected a pinch of pride, even in his face, formed firmly from a heritage of centuries of Mennonite humility. I looked down again. This was my fork. Of course, the handle had been broken unexpectedly and it was a three-pronged pitch fork instead of a multi-pronged manure fork. Nevertheless, the handle was sanded where my upper hand gripped and it was exactly my height.

I fixed my eye on a soft clump of cattle manure, stabbed, and heaved it into the spreader. The slightly delayed plop assured me my initiation was complete. The sharp smell of ammonia escaped from disturbed manure, a whiff of affirmation. The spreader positioned, the chorus approving, my fork presented with quiet dignity and the work relished. God save the Queen’s wave for another day.

I trace my ancestry to Andreas Martin, born ten generations before me, in Switzerland, in the mid 1600s. He was imprisoned by Catholics for his Anabaptist religious beliefs and advised his family to go to Germany. In the early 1700s, his son, David, is understood to have been the first Mennonite Martin to have crossed the ocean. Mennonites were invited to Pennsylvania to freely practice their faith, by William Penn, a Quaker. David Martin settled in Lancaster Co., Pennsylvania and after the death of his first wife, raised 13 children with his second wife. In 1820, his grandson, also a David with 13 children, was the first Mennonite Martin to move his family to a pioneer farm near St. Jacobs, in Waterloo County, Ontario. Seven generations later (significant perspective of Aboriginal teachers), I grew up on a farm within 10 km of St. Jacobs.

Although Mennonites were not United Empire Loyalists, they would not fight in the revolutionary war and objected to their unfair treatment by the revolutionaries of the Thirteen Colonies. Thus after 1776, some decided to move to relative peace in Ontario, under British rule.

Let's step back before Martin Mennonites, to 1517 in Wittenburg where Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses on the Catholic Church door in opposition to church sales of indulgences and the clergy's authority over individual salvation. Eight years later, in 1524 in the Netherlands, another catholic priest evolved as a reformer (Krahn and Dyck 1989). Menno Simons eventually expressed his opposition to:

- 1) Transubstantiation (he believed the Lord's Supper was symbolic and not the actual presence of Christ)
- 2) Infant baptism (he believed one should confess faith knowingly as an adult)
- 3) the swearing of oaths
- 4) carrying arms to fight wars.

It wasn't until 1536 that Menno Simons gave up the priesthood, admitting it had provided comfort and cover, and in 1537, some Dutch Anabaptists became known as Mennisten and later, Mennonites (Krahn and Dyck 1989). Menno Simons became the accepted leader partly because he dodged persecutors and survived to die a natural death. Other leaders such as Felix Manz, George Blaurock, Michael Sattler and Dirk Willem (Martyr's Mirror story heard earlier) disappeared as martyrs.

An interesting connection between Mennonites and Unitarians was noted in 1920, by Earl Wilbur, in his essay to the Ministerial Conference in Oakland, California on the Meaning and Lessons of Unitarian History.

“The early Anabaptists, who are also our historical and spiritual ancestors, in their direct way of Mysticism, made both their denials and their affirmations on the authority of what they deemed the inward witness of the Holy Spirit as interpreter of the Scripture to which they, too, professed to appeal as the final word of God. And it is noteworthy not only that some of the most outstanding leaders among the Anabaptists of the first generation of the Reformation were anti-trinitarian, but it was out of Anabaptist elements in Poland that the first Unitarian churches there were for the most part organized; that Anabaptists assisted in preparing the way for Unitarianism in Transylvania.; that it was their successors, the Mennonites in Holland, who gave our Polish brethren in exile their most friendly reception.”

Of course we know that Mennonites and Unitarians diverged somewhat since then. Mennonites today are decidedly Trinitarian and Old Order Mennonites, in particular, accept the Bible on faith and are quite skeptical of reason. Their ministers preach without formal academic preparation and without notes so that the Holy Spirit can guide them as they speak. I must confess, my current style is more Unitarian than Mennonite. However, I am fascinated that my roots are solidly in both traditions despite the different above-ground shoots, apparent in the two churches and in different parts of my own life.

Persecution was rampant in the early Mennonite communities and because they were pacifists and would not fight back, Mennonites scattered from the Netherlands to Germany, Switzerland, France and Prussia. Those in Prussia and Poland eventually traveled to Russia and Ukraine. Sandra Birdsell, a Canadian author and descendant of these Mennonites, describes their expulsion in a compelling story set during the Russian revolution, in her book 'The Russlander.' After the revolution, many Russian Mennonites were displaced to western

Canada and some went to Paraguay, Brazil and Mexico. Some of these Mennonites have since settled in Kennetcook, Nova Scotia.

The European Mennonites from Switzerland and Germany migrated to Pennsylvania and as I noted earlier some of these moved to Ontario. The Trail of the Conestoga, a novel by B. Mabel Dunham, sketches the pioneer trek of Mennonites from Pennsylvania to build a community in Waterloo Co., ON and pictures the motives, the difficulties, and also the rewards of this Mennonite pioneering venture. The Trail of the Black Walnut by George Elmore Reaman also describes these migrations and how Mennonites bought land where black walnut trees would grow. They knew this land would be fertile.

Mennonites are primarily farmers or involved in occupations that relate to agriculture. In the hubris of youth, at the age of 19, my rebellion was to announce "I will never shovel the soft, smelly, stuff again." Now, a few decades later, as a professor of agriculture enough said.

My 19th birthday was significant for me. Every family in my community had designated an age (18, 19, 20 or 21) of being "on your own." My father decided that my siblings and I would be on our own at 19. Until then, any money I earned while working for others was handed over to the family. Some of this money may have been used to buy clothes I needed. In a derogation of the rules, I was allowed to keep money I earned when working late evenings or nights when I caught chickens and turkeys. I successfully argued that I would not normally work during night time hours and as long as I could do all chores and field work expected of me during normal hours (6:30 am to 7:30 pm) I should be allowed to keep cash from night work. In retrospect, I think the agreement was considered a good deal by my father because he preferred that I work those odd hours rather than be drawn to strange night-time leisure activities he was noticing outside our community.

Old Order Mennonites in Waterloo and Wellington Counties, ON are plain people. They still travel with horse and buggies, wear plain dark- coloured clothes, avoid radios and TVs and movies, teach their children in separate schools, decline to participate in politics and mostly stay home. Education is practical and the three 'Rs' are well taught and learned in a class room until age 14 and then the emphasis is on apprenticing on neighbouring farms. Girls learn to quilt, cook, garden and mind children and boys learn carpentry, crop and livestock management, machinery maintenance and how to buy and sell.

During the offering this morning we heard, the first movement of the Pastoral symphony, Beethoven's 6th. It is sometimes entitled "Awakening of Cheerful Feelings on Arriving in the Country." The landscape quilt of Mennonite farms with children who demonstrate cheerful feelings, evokes joy, especially as shown by the photographer, Carl Hiebert, in his book, "Us Little People."

In my opinion, there is nothing more pastoral and restorative than a field of clover. About 12 years ago one of my grad students, Rupert Jannasch, presented me with a paper demonstrating that my Mennonite ancestors were known as the clover farmers. Interestingly, on the spiral of my heritage and destiny, I had been hired at NSAC as a professor of forage agronomy, about six years prior to seeing this paper. Rupert knew that red clover was my favourite crop. Today, with a pollinating bee, a red clover flower forms the background image of the Organic Agriculture Centre of Canada.

“David Möllinger, an outstanding German Mennonite farmer, "the father of agriculture in the Palatinate," was born in 1709. To feed his cattle he raised clover. He purchased part of a neighboring wooded hill, planted the bare top of the hill in clover and scattered limestone over it, which he ground in a mill driven by horsepower, and raised an amazingly good crop. A complete revolution in the system of crop rotation followed. Instead of letting every field lie fallow each alternate year, the soil was improved by the use of clover, his stand of cattle was trebled, the fertility of the soil increased, and the prosperity of the farmer improved.”

(Neff 1957)

Research has since shown that lime increases soil pH, crucial for biological nitrogen fixation in clover and other legumes. The residual nitrogen from a good clover crop can amount to 200 kg N per ha, more than adequate for heavy nitrogen feeding crops such as wheat and corn which can follow clover in a crop rotation. There are also symbiotic benefits of legume roots since they provide nitrogen to roots of intercropped non-legume crops. True to my Mennonite roots, this was the subject of my Ph.D. work.

Clover was also a distinguishing characteristic of Mennonite farmers in the New World.

“Red clover revolutionized American agriculture, and Plain (but Progressive) Mennonite farmers were among the first Americans to grow this important legume. Nitrogen-rich clover restores your soil fertility. It fattens your cows, fattens your wallet, and fattens your family. Clover seed was an important Lancaster County export. By the 1780s, newspapers were advertising "Lancaster County red clover seed" for sale.”

(Stoltzfus 2008)

The Old Order Mennonites of my home community are known to be thankful to their “Fount of Every Blessing” whether these blessings are clover, good health, gentle rains or as significant as the cries of war falling silent. However their gratitude, trust and cooperation should not be mistaken for naivety. Anyone who has conducted business with Mennonites will appreciate that economic value is sharply understood and the timing of buying or selling is expertly managed. My experience was that neighbours stood by their word to a fault and I was expected to do so too. Trust, cooperation and confidence grew from knowing that a deal is a deal.

I was curious about the business success of my elderly mentor, Amos Hoffman, in the context of his gentle, forgiving nature. He acknowledged that he might have lost about \$ 1 million or perhaps more to unpaid accounts over the decades in the feed business. However, he was quite sure that most customers who didn't pay were in dire financial straits and could not pay. With a smile he added, “when they got back on their feet they were my most loyal customers and brought other business to me too”. “Now, let's suppose I hired someone to collect all those bills. And let's say that on average I paid my bill collector \$25,000 per year over 40 years. “How much would that be?” he chuckled. Although it was a rhetorical question and I was a grown man the ritual of responding to my mentor was to provide an audible answer. “That's 1 million dollars, so I suppose you would be no further ahead” I offered. “Yes and what about my relationships in the community, if I had tried to collect money that

people couldn't pay?" he softly asked. This time a nod and smile of understanding sufficed. It had always been clear to me that relationships in our community, albeit flawed, were treasured and in the end our decisions always included a community impact assessment.

I was raised to respect the pacifism of my Mennonite community. Grandma firmly scolded me when I suggested I would like to know the adventure of being in the RCMP. "They shoot guns and we don't" she stated flatly. That settled it and I never considered applying again. Peace is more than an after thought. Peace is the foundation of belief. The hymn "Make Me a Channel of Your Peace" speaks eloquently to aspirations of Mennonite individuals and communities.

Perhaps humility is the trait I recall being taught most clearly, albeit with very few words. I admit my training was not as successful as intended. In Old Order Mennonite biennial communion services, following the drinking of symbolic wine and eating symbolic bread, the men in pairs wash one another's feet, as do the women.

"If I then your Lord and Master have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet"

John 13:14

Community is primary. When an Old Order Mennonite has a complaint against another community member it can be expressed to the Ministers but only if it has been discussed first with the perpetrator in an attempt to resolve the issue. In the end, individuals yield their grievances to the peace of the community. Is their resentment? Yes but sacrifice for God and community is considered normal. Those who choose not to defer to the community, leave.

About thirty years ago when driving a bulk milk tank truck through the countryside of the Ottawa Valley, I heard Peter Gzowski interviewing a teacher from Winnipeg. She had left a Hutterite community (similar in some ways to Mennonite traditions) about twenty years prior to the interview. Gzowski in his usual fashion, disarmed her and the almost intimate revelations surprised me. How could she share those things on the radio? Finally he asked, "do you regret leaving your community?" There was a pause longer than any I'd known Gzowski to permit and she slowly answered. "Since living in the outside world, I've learned that individualism is highly overrated."

My grandmother suffered from arthritis and my mother and Aunt Alma were struggling to look after her, while raising us; 5 in mom's brood and 6 in Aunt Alma's. I don't recall who organized the schedule or when it started but it seemed normal to me that a woman from the community would show up every morning to help with laundry, cooking, dishes and other household chores. My mom and aunt were then free to look after Grandma. This lasted at least two years until the Lord took grandma home.

A discussion about Mennonites would not be complete (not that any such discussion ever is) without a reference to heaven. When my grandparents died I was exhorted to be happy because they had gone to heaven and were no longer suffering. The Paridisum from Faure's Requiem, played as you prepared for the service this morning, evokes a vision of a life beyond sorrow.

Some of you may have read the Governor General's award winning novel 'A Complicated Kindness' by Miriam Toews. There are many themes in this book but the obsession with going to heaven was striking. Furthermore, Mennonites are a peculiar and separate people, not conformed to this world but transformed. Why worry about being odd or different as a community when heaven awaits? For Mennonite teens the take is different.

“We’re Mennonites. After Dukhobors who show up naked in court we are the most embarrassing sub-sect of people to belong to if you’re a teenager. Five hundred years ago in Europe a man named Menno Simons set off to do his own peculiar religious thing and he and his followers were beaten up and killed or forced to conform all over Holland, Poland, and Russia until they, at least some of them, finally landed right here where I sit. Imagine the least well-adjusted kid in your school starting a breakaway clique of people whose manifesto includes a ban on the media, dancing, smoking, movies, drinking, rock’n’roll, having sex for fun, swimming, makeup, jewellery, playing pool, going to cities, or staying up past nine o’clock. That was Menno all over. Thanks a lot, Menno.” (Toews 2004)

I winced my way through “A Complicated Kindness” and kept wanting to tell Miriam that she was heavy on the negative. The Mennonite Central Committee, including Ten Thousand Villages, has an excellent reputation for development work. The peace work of Project Ploughshares emerged from Conrad Grebel College, a Mennonite liberal arts college. Now our CUC and other churches support Ploughshares via the Canadian Council of Churches. Keep in mind too the diversity of Mennonites today. There are almost 1.5 million members in 75 countries. It is described as a worldwide, Christ-centered, biblically based community of faith that began in Europe in the 1500s. Today almost two thirds are found outside of North America.

I must admit that as I grew up my family did not actually belong to a Mennonite church. My grandparents, on both sides, had joined other Old Order Mennonites to form a Plymouth Brethern assembly, a few years before my parents married. Nevertheless, my cultural, ancestral and to a large extent, my spiritual influences, were Mennonite. My grandparents and parents chose to live in a sub-community with some doctrinal differences compared to other Mennonite groups. Mennonites have been re-assembling for years in small groups as they re-evaluate what it means to be genuine Christians who are separate from the world.

My choice was different than that of my grandparents and parents. I chose to move away from the Mennonite community, at several levels. Now I too understand that individualism is highly overrated. I also appreciate that it’s relatively easy for me to let go of the distracting toys of modern society. Choosing community based on the values learned in childhood has helped me build a new community. The balancing of legitimate individual aspirations and a collective human need for meaningful community fascinates me.

The example of Old Order Mennonites to live simply within sustainable communities is a beacon as we endeavor to live in a world of exhausted resources and polluted soil, air and water. The interconnected web of life, our community, extends to all living creatures (my granddad instinctively knew this).

Seven generations ago, before oil, David Martin settled in St. Jacobs to farm as a faithful servant. Now, in the midst of our great fossil flameout and climate change we live in peril and possibility. I expect the lives of my descendants, seven generations in the future, and well beyond oil, to draw from the model of the life of David Martin, seven generations ago and that of many of my relatives, even today.

References

Birdsell, Sandra. 2001. *The Russlander*. McClelland and Stewart. Toronto, ON.

Dunham, B. Mabel. 1924. *The Trail of the Conestoga*. Macmillan Co. Toronto, ON.

Hiebert, Carl. 1998. *Us Little People*. Stoddart Publishing. Toronto, ON.

Krahn, Cornelius and Dyck, Cornelius J. 1989. "Menno Simons (1496-1561)." *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online. Available from: <http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/M4636ME.html> [Accessed 2008, May 30]

Neff, Christian. 1957. "Möllinger, David (1709-1786)." *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online. Available from: <http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/M6516.html> [Accessed 2008, May 30]

Reaman, George Elmore. 1974. *The Trail of the Black Walnut*. McClelland and Stewart. Toronto, ON.

Stoltzfus, Lee Jay. 2008. *The Black Art: A History of Printing in Lancaster Co., PA*. Lancaster County: Rolling in Clover in 1829. Available from: http://www.lancasterlyrics.com/o_john_baer/index.html [Accessed 2008, May 30]

Toews, Miriam. 2004. *A Complicated Kindness*. Knopf. Toronto, ON.

Wilbur, Earl Morse. 1920. *The Meaning and Lessons of Unitarian History*. Berry Street Essay, Starr King School of the Ministry, Oakland, CA.