



Menno focus

First Mennonite Church of Denver

November 2009

From the Editor

by Vern Rempel

Hello, dear Focus reader.

This newsletter comes to you in the season of harvest, in the northern hemisphere. I remember in our small Mennonite Brethren church in Joes, CO, out on the eastern plains, we would have our annual "Harvest/Mission Festival." This often involved a visiting missionary couple telling their stories, showing slides, and bringing such child-delight items as pottery and snake skins. We would have a church potluck in the basement. And we would sing those great songs for harvest: "Come, ye thankful people, come," "Sing to the Lord of harvest," and "For the beauty of the earth."

Even in the context of a great city, we may feel the deep rhythms of our hemisphere, and may find this to be a time of soul-harvest. What has been growing in our souls?

Contemplative and Exploratory Retreat at Snowmass

by Vern Rempel

It is my privilege to be able to offer a retreat for eight people at the Trappist monastery and retreat center in Snowmass. This retreat will run from 9:00 PM on Friday evening, December 11, through 9:00 AM Monday morning, December 13. During the retreat there will be opportunity for guided group reflection, some sharing in dyads (two people sharing), and personal journaling and silence. We will be using poetry and story as a basis for reflection, and also the writings of Parker Palmer, Quaker educator and mystic. The cost is \$120 per person. There are four rooms with single beds, and a kitchen in which we will prepare our own meals.

What have we gathered that we may now lay in store as treasured provision? What may we store there to provide for us during the frozen silences of fallow winter? What will we choose to leave behind, and perhaps not let grow next year (Less zucchini? Fewer fears and distortions?). How may we be a community of "stone soup," sharing our provisions for all passages of life?

In this issue, a reflection on stewardship, some offerings from Parker Palmer, Harlan's amazing wool-gathering work: "this month in history," prayers for Mountain States Mennonite Conference and information from the October FMC Leadership Council meeting. Find a hearth; read.

Vern Rempel, ed.

This retreat may be for you if you want to do work on your life's direction (something we may do at any age), if you need a chance for centered spiritual renewal, if you would enjoy shared reflection in a beautiful alpine setting.

Here is a sampling of insights from Parker Palmer's book *Let Your Life Speak*. These thoughts will help shape the direction of our conversation at Snowmass.

1) On vocation (at any age):

- "What am I meant to do? Who am I meant to be?"
- "Before you tell your life what you intend to do with

- it, listen for what it intends to do with you.”
- “Vocation does not come from willfulness. It comes from listening.”
- “There is a great gulf between the way my ego wants to identify me, with its protective masks and self-serving fictions, and my true self.”
- “Running beneath the surface of the experience I call my life, there is a deeper and truer life waiting to be acknowledged.”

2) On his experience of depression (the hard work of growth):

- “I still find depression difficult to speak about because the experience is so unspeakable.”
- “Embracing the mystery of depression does not mean passivity or resignation. It means moving into a field of forces that seems alien but is in fact one’s deepest self.”
- “I had always imagined God to be in the same general direction as everything else that I valued: up. I had failed to appreciate the meaning of some words that had intrigued me since I first heard them in seminary -

Tillich’s description of God as the ‘ground of being.’”

- “The God whom I know dwells quietly in the root system of the very nature of things.”

3) On leadership (which is something we all may do):

- “The great wisdom traditions tell us... go far enough on the inner journey,... and you end up not lost in narcissism but returning to the world, bearing more gracefully the responsibilities that come with being human.”
- “We are not victims of society: we are its co-creators. We live in and through a complex interaction of spirit and matter, of the powers inside of us and the stuff ‘out there’ in the world.”
- “The spiritual traditions do not deny the reality of the outer world. They simply claim that we can help make that world by projecting our spirit on it.... Our complicity in world making is a source of awesome and sometimes painful responsibility.”

Conference Prayers

Compiled by Nancy Stoltzfus, MSMC Prayer Network Coordinator

Please offer these prayers for MSMC:

1. Guidance and wisdom for churches and gatherings taking root in the Denver area and their leadership: Carlene Hill with Grace Mennonite Church, Phil and Gail Ebersole with The Bridge, and Dayvid Graybill with Another Way.

2. Wisdom and clarity for all churches seeking pastors

3. Thanksgiving and guidance for the SEED project as it seeks relationship with churches committed to renewal and revitalization within the conference.

4. Needed financial gifts in response to the renovation of the septic system at RMMC.

5. Thanksgiving for the contributions of work, time, creativity and finances given to the MCC Relief Sale. May the blessings continue to flow through this chain of giving.

The Month of November

Compiled by Harlan D. Unrau

November 1984 – 25 Years Ago

2 – Velma Barfield became the first woman executed in the United States since 1962, in Raleigh, North Carolina.

Barfield, who professed her Christian faith while on death row, was also the first woman to die by lethal injection.

6 – Republican Ronald Reagan defeated Democrat Walter Mondale in the US presidential election with 59 percent of the popular vote. Reagan carried 49 states in the Electoral College, while Mondale carried only his home state of Minnesota and the District of Columbia.

11 – An FMC congregational meeting passed a motion declaring its support of the sanctuary movement in the Denver area for persons fleeing from violence in Central America.

28 – Over 265 years after their deaths, William Penn and his second wife Hannah Callowhill Penn were made Honorary Citizens of the United States. Penn was an English founder and “Absolute Proprietor” of the Province of Pennsylvania,

the English North American colony and the future Commonwealth of Pennsylvania that became one of the original 13 states of the United States. (US citizenship has been known to become a lengthy, cumbersome process for some!)

November 1959 – 50 Years Ago

1 – Jacques Plante of the Montreal Canadiens became the first National Hockey League goalie in modern times to wear a face mask, donning it after a shot from Andy Bathgate (New York Rangers) struck him in the face. (Soon all goalies, preferring to retain their faces intact, were wearing masks!)

6 – In Boston, Dr. Bernard Lown was inspired to create the direct current heart defibrillator after using 400 volts of electricity to restore the heart rhythm of a patient, known to history as “Mr. C___.”

11 – Werner Heyde, a psychiatrist who had guided the euthanizing of more than 100,000 handicapped persons in Nazi Germany during 1939-42, usually by lethal injection, surrendered to police in Frankfurt after 13 years as a fugitive. On February 13, 1964, five days before his trial was to start, Heyde hanged himself.

16 – *The Sound of Music*, written by Rodgers and Hammerstein, premiered on Broadway at the Lunt-Fontanne Theater. Mary Martin starred as Maria von Trapp.

18 – *Ben-Hur*, which would become the most popular film of the year and win a record 12 Academy Awards, debuted at New York’s Loews Theater in 70 mm Ultra Panavision, before a nationwide and then worldwide release.

28 – The first of the Nashville sit-ins, aimed at ending discriminatory policies against African-Americans at lunch counters, began with a test run at Harveys Department Store in downtown Nashville, Tennessee. By 1960 the nonviolent protests were being duplicated, successfully and nationwide.

November 1934 – 75 Years Ago

27 – A running gun battle in Barrington, Illinois, between FBI agents and bank robber and murderer Lester Joseph Gillis, otherwise known as Baby Face Nelson, resulted in the death of one FBI agent and the mortal wounding of special agent Samuel P. Cowley, who was still able to mortally wound Nelson.

November 1909 – 100 Years Ago

11 – The U.S. Navy established a naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, that would become internationally known some 32 years later.

13 – Birthdate of Marvin Unrau, my father, at Moundridge, Kansas.

18 – Land agent Jacob Kauffman commented on the emerging Amish settlement at Matheson (Elbert County), Colorado, in *The Sugarcreek Budget*: “We are very much pleased to see so many of our Amish friends locate here among us, as we never experience a more healthful or pleasant climate than we find in this part of Colorado, and the best farm land is cheap yet.”

November 1884 – 125 Years Ago

4 – Democrat Grover Cleveland defeated Republican James G. Blaine in the US presidential election to win the first of his two non-consecutive terms. Cleveland carried 20 states to Blaine’s 18, winning the popular vote – 48.5% to 48.2% and the Electoral College vote – 219 to 182.

November 1859 – 150 Years Ago

24 – British naturalist Charles Darwin published *The Origin of the Species*, a book which argued that species gradually evolve through natural selection. (The initial print of the book sold out immediately, but its thesis initiated an argument that is still evolving!)

November 1784 – 225 Years Ago

26 – The Roman Catholic Apostolic Prefecture of the United States was established. Because Maryland was one of the few regions of the United States that was predominantly Catholic, the apostolic prefecture was elevated to become the Diocese of Baltimore – the first diocese in the United States – on November 6, 1789.

Reflection on Stewardship

This is a revision of a sermon I preached on stewardship in 2004. – Vern Rempel

Deuteronomy 12:17-19

...Nor may you eat within your towns the tithe of your grain, your wine, and your oil, the firstlings of your herds and your flocks, any of your votive gifts that you vow, your freewill offerings, or your donations;

these you shall eat in the presence of the LORD your God at the place that the LORD your God will choose, you together with your son and your daughter, your male and female slaves, and the Levites resident in your towns, rejoicing in the presence of the LORD your God in all your undertakings. Take care that you do not neglect the Levite as long as you live in your land.

Football

I remember, as I'm sure many of us do, going to my high school's football games: the fighting Tigers of Ulysses, Kansas. "On you Tigers, on you Tigers, fight right down that line." It was sweet. Especially, I thought, when it was cold. Everybody's breath frosted, a thousand souls breathing, as if the individual souls all puffed up out of the bodies and hovered above the ball field like a heavenly host waiting to cheer, waiting to take up the hallelujah chorus of the home team. "On you Tigers...."

You had to get out the big gear for cold weather, the parkas and long-johns and blankets. There was the potential for some lucky souls to snuggle together against the chill fingers of deepening Autumn. The night was dark. All the town was dark, except that upside-down bowl of light that you could see as you drove to the ball field. That's where the action was. "What's going on tonight? A ball game down at the field!" We knew what action was and where to find it. Our friends would be there. We could buy a bag of chips. We could watch the cheerleaders' liturgical dance. We could see our man cross the line into victory. "On you tigers...."

Everybody was at the game, in the same sense that Mark reports when he says that all the people of Jerusalem came out to hear John the Baptist at the river Jordan. The ball game was a community event. It was a happening.

A happening

One theme is a constant presence throughout the entire complex gathering of writings that we call The Bible: God calls into being a people, a community. From Sarah and Abraham's family to the returned Hebrew exiles to the church of Corinth, God calls into being a

community. God calls into being a happening, one might say. Like small-town football.

Now there are many things that make a community possible. Gifts and talents great and small, as the saying goes. I may have told you that one of my childhood ministers used to divide church talent into Sunday morning material and Sunday evening material. My playing "Put your hand in the hand of the man who stilled the waters" on my guitar at age 12 was definitely Sunday evening material. But all talents make a community: teaching, music, organization. And of course a community needs money. There is no community in the Bible that I'm aware that didn't have a financial factor as a major consideration. For example, collecting money was one of Paul's key acts of discipleship and reconciliation between Jew and Greek.

But one of my favorite accounts of the use of money—or, more exactly, offerings—is the one from Deuteronomy. Here the command is for everyone to bring their gifts and offerings and have a party—a feast. People are to bring grain, wine, oil, the best cattle and any other offerings.

And here's the thing: the people are to eat what they bring. But none of this may be eaten at home—"within your towns" as the text says. Instead, it reads "these you shall eat in the presence of the LORD your God at the place that the LORD your God will choose, you together with your son and your daughter, your male and female slaves, and the Levites resident in your towns,...." Everybody gets together at a happening and makes a feast. That is what the offerings make possible for rich and poor, female and male, and so on, including the people called apart as priests - the Levites, who make their living in the midst of these assemblies. And it says "rejoicing in the presence of the LORD your God in all your undertakings...." Talk about cheerful giving.

What do you get?

Now, I'm not going to give you one of those stewardship sermons that tells you to give, because the Bible says so, and so on. Those are all right. But this is a straight up post-modern appeal. You put down your money; now here's what you get.

What do you get when you share offerings? You get a community. You get a place of happening. You get a

place where the souls all breath out together and the breath goes up and just waits to sing the hallelujah chorus of the Divine Presence in our lives.

More specifically you get the following:

You get Christian Education - Just ask a Sunday School teacher about the preciousness of the children during opening time and in their classes: the games played, songs learned, stories told, questions asked.

You get small groups. When these are healthy, small groups in this congregation are a place for mutual care, visitation; they help you move your stuff and grieve deaths in your family. They are a sounding board for personal, global, and congregational discussions. At best they are a place of informal and formal spiritual formation. Faith—it's not just for children anymore. In fact, our children will be rowing up stream against a strong current if we adults are not dedicating ourselves to our own spiritual growth and commitment to the path of Jesus Christ.

What do you get in this congregation? You get pastoral counseling. Counseling for marriage preparation, crisis counseling, counseling in the midst of loss or career change or depression, conversation on the occasion of your wedding anniversary or your birthday. This is not professional therapy. But it is a conversation based on trust and deep relationship, conversation with a trusted pastor who has given her or himself to theological and ethical reflection for years and has the perspective of countless conversations about everything under the sun. One of the big messages of pastoral counseling: you are not alone in your puzzling or difficult or even embarrassing dilemma. Another big message – God loves you. In all things.

You get organization. The backbone and structure of congregational organization. This is a place that actually works, a place where coming together is fun, challenging, life-changing. All that happens supported by a framework of a responsible and joyful leadership council; honest, skilled, hard-working staff; and many, many volunteers who “populate the village”, if you will, of all the tasks and processes of this congregational community, from building management to food preparation. You get a lovely shared building in which to celebrate, meet, eat, hang out. You get leadership wisdom, people considering thoughtfully and with effort how to nurture the health of this community.

You get outreach and mission. You get a place that supports projects and initiatives of peace, sharing the wealth, hope for all people, projects much larger than

oneself, a largeness that feels truly wonderful when you are part of it. From international friendships, to disaster relief, to agricultural development, to community organizing, you become part of making the world a better place.

You get a Mennonite tradition and conference in which to be nourished; you can struggle with it; you can say “yes” and “no”. But it is a place of deep rootedness; a social story and a history in which one may grow and make one's own contribution to preservation and change.

You get all the moves of shared worship, from gorgeous instrumental music to the grand tradition of *a cappella* hymn-singing, to the introit with dear children bringing forward candle, cloth and Bible for worship. You get the voices of lovely people inviting you to new connections and involvements. You hear people lifting up their joys and sorrows in prayer. You hear ancient writings read for understanding how they connect with our lives today. You have a chance to join in prayer with many people of good will – a spiritual solidarity.

And let's not leave out sermons. In graduate school, as I studied preaching, I had the privilege of listening to many other sermons. When someone preaches with good will and faith, even if I disagree with some of the content, I am always moved. I have puzzled over why those classes so quickly feel like communities of faith and trust. Sermons are often made into a joke: don't make it too long; don't preach to me, etc. But I'll tell you, I believe all good pastors lead with sermons. Not because all pastors are equal in writing and speaking ability. But rather because in the composition of a sermon, a person is giving themselves to the congregation in self-disclosure—this is who I am. A person is giving themselves in teaching an ancient text. In a good sermon, a person attempts to come to terms with an ancient Biblical text, to permit transformation in themselves through that text; incidental details are revealed, but also people are trying to put into words what matters most to them about a season or text or occasion and to offer it with voice and face and body. Sermons are a literary “living sacrifice”, if you will, a personal witness, and a deep spiritual self-disclosure.

You get weddings and memorials. You may be married in the midst of a people who know your name and who are excited with you. They anticipate with you the joy of your marriage as well as the inevitable trials. They stand to support you. And when you die, you die in the midst of a people who know your name and will remember you. How wonderful in the midst of grief and loss to be

named by a people who remember you and love you and carry your life's influence forward. Your substance "goes into the ground" of the community and bears fruit there.

And you get friendship. A congregation such as this is a place where trust is built and nurtured. You get a place where people learn your name and all the layers of meaning that go with it. In this way, a congregation becomes a mediating institution. We are not alone. Nor are we just Americans. In between those small and large identities are places of real socialization and shared life. It make take awhile to get the bonds woven. But when they are, what a tremendous value it is.

And finally, you get eternal life. Not eternal life as some sanction for good behavior but rather eternal life as the way of good behavior, now and forever. You have the opportunity to accept the way of the Spirit of Christ and to align yourself and tune yourself and find the path of love of neighbor as self, of love of enemy, of transformation and healing and hope. These things are eternal. But I mean real eternal life. As Woody Allen once said: I don't want to live on in my works; I want to live on be keeping on living. I think it is in the deepest intuition of the human race as our consciousness has evolved in the good work of the creating Spirit, that this is not the end of things. It is a wise human intuition that the love, the presence, the Person of God in the deepest waters and interstellar reaches of creation grants eternity. Amid clouds of quarks and quantum and gravitational forces; we are beings of energy and soul. And when we embrace the ways of love and compassion and transformation, turning from evil and hungering for justice and righteousness, then we are choosing eternal pathways.

When I pray for people, including you all, I imagine a light beginning to grow within each one: either in mind or in a body that is ailing or just out of the middle of the place of soul, and it grows in brightness until it radiates with strings of light all around. And I imagine the light is a greater love and hope than I can manufacture on my own for anyone. It is the light of the Divine Presence, the light of God for each one.

This is what you get. What you give makes all this happen – it makes a happening of community: your offerings, your grain and wine and oil and cattle and just anything that makes for a shared feast. That is stewardship. That is community. Amen.

Highlights of October Leadership Council Meeting

by Karen Martin

The FMC Leadership Council met on October 18. Chair Craig Sommers called the meeting to order. Pastor Vern Rempel led in prayer. The Council approved the minutes of the September meeting as written.

Dawn Kreider, Coordinator of Finance, presented the finance report. As of the end of September, contributions are behind by \$-19,400. However, since the budget is under spent, we are up +\$1,000 on the bottom line.

Craig Sommers updated the Council on staff. Barb Yoder Stutzman is reducing her hours to 10 hours per week; the Administrative Assistant hours will increase to 32 hours/week; the search committee for the Pastor for Child and Youth Faith Formation has been meeting; Annie Lengacher Browning will be on family leave for 12 weeks starting next May and Vern is due for a sabbatical in 2010 which will be determined relative to hiring the new pastor.

The Council reviewed staff structure and job descriptions and voted to approve them.

The proposed 2010 budget was presented to the Council. The Council voted to recommend it to the Congregation for discussion on November 1.

The Council reviewed and approved a proposal for a trial of two worship services on Sunday mornings starting during Lent.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:50 PM.

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