

# S O P H I A

W I S D O M

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



*Sisters*

FALL 1997 VOLUME 7 NUMBER 3

## *Sophia*

A Greek feminine noun associated with the biblical wisdom tradition, translated "wisdom" and personified in the book of Proverbs; equivalent in the New Testament to logos, the creative word that was with God in the beginning, creating and giving life to the world.

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## **Contents**

### **EDITORIAL**

- 3 Not a Spiritual Word? - by Lori Matties

### **FEATURES**

- 4 Finding Our Sisters - by Lois Edmund  
5 Bridging the Gap - by Helga Doerner  
6 What I Learned From My Sister's Clothes - by Cheryl Fieguth  
7 Cinnamon Rolls and Prayer - by Marge Warkentin  
Between Sisters - by Katie Dirks  
8 Reconnecting Siblings - by Merrill Unger  
9 The Same ... but Different - by Lorie Battershill  
11 Dear Edith - by Mary Regehr  
12 My Sister's Dance - by Naomi Enns  
14 To My Sisters Beyond the Wall - by Marianne Ewert Worcester  
16 Crossing the Boundaries:  
A Tribute: P. Karuna Shri Joel, 1964-1996 - by Lori Matties  
18 Overcoming the Barriers - by Christine Enns  
19 In Zambia My Sister Is ... - by Janet P. Schmidt  
22 *Nahe Verein*

### **COLUMNS**

- 10 AS I SEE IT: Ode to Sisterhood - by Eleanor Martens  
20 A BROTHER'S PERSPECTIVE:  
A Brother Among Them - by Jim Pankratz  
21 LETTERS  
23 SHELFLIFE: The Work of Their Hands - Mennonite Women's  
Societies in Canada - reviewed by Margaret Harder  
In Her Own Voice: Childbirth Stories from Mennonite Women -  
reviewed by Agnes Dyck

### **POETRY**

- 13 A Gift for Thanksgiving - by Barbara Slater

### **About the Cover:**

"Sisters," and drawings throughout this issue, are done by Elisabeth Vensel (nee Friesen) a Winnipeg artist. Lis received her BFA and BEd at the University of Manitoba and has taught fine arts in secondary schools. She is currently interested in church art. She attends Church of the Way.



## EDITORIAL

# Not a Spiritual Word?

by Lori Matties

Apparently "sister" is not a spiritual word. When I was searching for a Scripture verse for the back page of this issue, the only one I found that did not refer to biological sisters or neighbouring countries (other than a few references to "my sister, my bride" in Song of Solomon) was the one we always print on our front cover: "Say to wisdom, you are my sister" (Prov 7:4a). I suppose this should not be surprising given that ancient Hebrew and Greek cultures prized sons and not daughters. But after spending the last several weeks with so many memories and reflections on sisters, the word seems a ripe image to me, one that is both earthy and spiritual, one that teaches us much about relationship, faith, covenant, love.

As the youngest of four sisters (we also have two brothers), my memories of growing up usually have to do with competition for attention or with trying to find my own way when I felt my older siblings had already accomplished everything. Even now, I'm often surprised by that "little sister syndrome," which finds me standing back while everyone else is making decisions and doing tasks. I have to remind myself that I really am a competent and talented adult! On the other hand, we have a lot of fun together. I've enjoyed getting to know each one of them as an adult.

The sister bond is powerful and important, and we think it is well worth exploring – how we love each other, how we often compete, how we share history and genetics. Not all sisters are biological. Some are created by a spiritual kinship that crosses

many boundaries. Most of the articles you'll read here are personal reflections, some painful, some challenging, most grateful. Merrill Unger and Lois Edmund, both counsellors, share ideas with us about how to nurture sisterhood and repair broken bonds. I hope you find them helpful. And I hope you find, as I did, a rich heritage in the word "sister."

This issue of Sophia marks some endings and some exciting beginnings. We say goodbye, with many thanks, to Agnes Hubert, who has handled subscriptions and circulation since the fall of 1994. Thanks also to Darlene Loewen, who has agreed to take Agnes's place. The editorial collective welcomes two new members: Lorie Battershill of Grace Lutheran Church, the former editor of *Esprit*, a publication of the women's organization of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, and Lis Vensel, a former teacher and an artist who attends Church of the Way. Both bring talent and expertise that we look forward to sharing with you.

Another beginning for us is a Patron. We are thankful that the DeFehr Foundation has taken us on as a project, which means we no longer have to wonder whether we'll have funds to print another issue. 1998 will see us publishing four issues instead of three, and we're seeking ways to make Sophia more widely known and read. Also in 1998 we will be raising our subscription rate to reflect more realistically the cost of producing Sophia. You may want to renew your subscription before then!

### MISSION STATEMENT

*Sophia offers a forum for women in the MB church. Her pages provide room for dialogue, room for women to speak to each other about their place in the family, the church, the work place and the world. She recognizes that the MB sisterhood is rural, urban and suburban, that its members speak with various voices.*

*Sophia offers herself as a rallying place for women in an uncertain, changing world. She is interested in women's stories, in their aspirations and disappointments, their successes and failures. She invites expressions of joy and sorrow, concern and outrage. She encourages women in the use of their gifts in all spheres of life.*

*Although Sophia was conceived and brought to birth by and for MB women and celebrates sisterhood, it is her desire to be inclusive. She hopes to challenge both men and women; she welcomes their voices and invites them into dialogue.*

*Sophia acknowledges the authority of God, the giver of wisdom, and of the sacred Scriptures, the story of God's dealings with women and men.*

*"Oh the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!" (Romans 11:33)*

# Finding Our Sisters

by Lois Edmund

I have two extraordinary natural sisters. It has always surprised me that my relationships with them are like night and day. I have often struggled to understand the differences between them. My relationship with Marcie is easy, passionate. Our values are similar and we have made similar life choices. We can celebrate the differences between us because they can be fruitful or creative and they are based on a shared foundation. I can explore her and myself without heroic courage and come to delightful insights because of her generosity in sharing herself. Marcie has been a soul mate to me. I am free to ask the harder questions in the context of our relationship.

With Jan, though, painful barriers have riddled us since we were young. They have kept us from respecting each other, except at a distance. Nonsensical competition between us has been subtle and destructive. Conflict has been too rarely spoken but painfully unresolved when it was expressed, so we are quiet. I admire Jan's strength and agility of mind but cannot share the part of her that is so focused on computers, the law and politics. We cannot talk so we cannot touch. She talks to my husband; I talk to our brother.

Ambivalence might be a catch-word for every sister relationship. Those who have no sisters long for the intimacy some sisters develop, while those who have sisters too often disdain the bond. Even Marcie and I had an adolescent period of rejecting distance, which we did not resolve with speech.

Studies about sisterhood are disappointingly few. How is it different from "brotherhood?" What can sisters share that is precious? How is this bond novel and unique? I was disheartened that I found little assistance except in poetry and fiction. Simply stated, we do not understand or value sisterhood.

In the Bible, although the word "brother" and its derivatives appear 875 times (7 pages in the concordance), "sister" and its derivatives occur only 36 times, 11 of these in conjunction with "brother." We have no theology of sisterhood. We rarely worship with our "sister" fellowship.

In contemporary society, too, we give little value to sisterhood. Men are so ambivalent about their sisters that an elemental insult is to call another male a "sissie" (sister!). Girls and women often cheapen sister relationships with criticism, jealousy and mutual scorn. Our ambivalence about ourselves as sisters renders us indifferent – the ugly, neutral state of not caring – and yields a chronic state of neglect, even though there is much to be learned.

In the Bible, a family relationship could include any individuals bound by so-called "one flesh," which was, in fact, formed by sharing a fundamental character and claiming unity. Thus, the biblical family included not only

those bound by genetics but also those who chose or were chosen to belong, such as in-laws, servants, travellers, or adopted ones.

Sisterhood could be viewed in a similar way. I have two natural sisters but, when I think about it, I have also been given countless additional sisters. They include my very best friend, my sisters-in-law, a spiritual friend and another friend who embroidered a plaque: "A sister is a forever-friend."

Sisters have a common experience that cannot be shared with brothers or with the generic community. Sisters are those who stand with each other as we satisfy life's requirements, tedious, routine, or extraordinary. Sisterhood can be powerful in helping us meet life's challenges with equanimity and confidence.

It would do our souls and lives well to cultivate sisterhood. Allow me to suggest a few measures we can take to do this.



Illustration: E. Vensel



First, *desire*: we have to want a sister to be a sister. I think my sister Jan and I do still wish we could really be sisters, but perhaps neither of us dares to want each other. Wanting and desiring the bond breeds a certain commitment to working towards it.

Second, *modelling*: we can learn from Naomi and Ruth, from David and Jonathan, from Jesus and John, from older women and our grandmothers, even though they may not have been sisters. We can model for each other what sisterhood is, at its bravest and most blessed.

Third, *mentoring, or teaching*: as we learn we must be committed to passing on our knowledge to other sisters and to further learning from them.

Fourth, *gratitude*: we must be grateful for the sisters we have been given, and thankful for the gifts they share with us.

Fifth, *sharing*: here I mean exploring and sharing the unique experiences of girls' and womens' lives. Sharing brings us closer, especially when we can share our tragedies. I'm closer to my sister when we're confronted by our father's heart attack, my sister's miscarriage, my failed examination.

Sisterhood is powerful. While this has been understood for centuries, history has led us to an artificial ambivalence about sister relationships, which robs us of their power. We need to learn to give and receive the best that we as women have to offer one another.

\*\*\*\*\*  
*Dr. Lois Edmund is a clinical psychologist with a private practice in Winnipeg. She teaches part time at Concord and Menno Simons Colleges and attends Home Street Mennonite Church.*

## Bridging The Gap

by Helga Doermer

Three and a half years separate us. In the early years it seemed to be an unbridgeable gap. She was the eldest, the wanted one, the outgoing and pretty one, with her white-blonde hair, fair skin, blue eyes and rosebud mouth. She had me believing that I was not her natural sister but an adopted ugly duckling, with my mouse-brown hair, olive skin and full lips. Those were the years of sisterly spats, which usually ended up with my howling in outrage or in misery. I was incapable of besting my sister in any of our contrary encounters.

As I entered my teen years, our relationship began a process of transformation from antagonist to friend. Those were the years in which she became my mentor. When the comforting dark blanket of night enveloped us, we were often drawn into intimate conversation before sleep overcame us.

The year I graduated from high school, she celebrated her wedding. For each of us, a chapter of life had closed and another was beginning. On the night of her wedding, I returned to our room, which had now become my room, and emptiness weighed heavily upon me. Having found my identity as "little sister" for so many years, I was now on my own. My identity had changed.

Years later, as I prepared for my own wedding, there was no doubt but that I favoured her as the one to have at my side. She was the woman who knew me best and could help me conceptualize the dreams I most desired to live out that day. From designing and sewing a wedding gown to encouraging me to take time to rest and relax the day before the wedding, she held her special place as the plans unfolded and the celebration crystallized into reality.

Birth of our first children several weeks apart opened a new common ground, that of motherhood, and the seed of kinship flowered. In the intervening years we have shared the challenges and pleasures of being wives, mothers and homemakers and integrating our personal lives with community commitments. As our children grow and mature, we walk alongside each other on this ever-changing road, providing encouragement, inspiration, comfort and companionship. From antagonist to mentor and from mentor to close friend, age has lost its power to separate us. The gap has been bridged.

\*\*\*\*\*  
*Helga Doermer is a member of Eastview MB Church in Winnipeg.*

# What I learned from My Sister's Clothes

by Cheryl Fieguth

If my sister had never gone to live in Australia, perhaps my life would still be as simple as it used to be. My wardrobe used to consist of blue jeans, plaid flannel shirts, one lumber jacket and a pair of steel-toed boots. The boots were my only weapon, as you never knew when you had to kick your way out of something. To complete the ensemble, I carried a red backpack.

When my sister moved to Australia, I inherited her wardrobe (just to borrow). This gave me the opportunity to investigate high heels, flouncy little dresses and all the accessories. Never mind that I lived in Whitehorse, Yukon, where everyone else wore blue jeans and lumber jackets. I decided to experiment with being a lady (if ladies wear those little straps-around-the-ankles stilettos). I wore these things to a party in Whitehorse, then had to sneak back to nurses' residence, over the bridge, slinking along beside the Yukon River in broad daylight when the other nurses were already emerging from residence on their way to day shift.

Eventually I had to give the wardrobe back. But I had started to add to my own wardrobe, especially in the shoe department. Since then I have either lived in the north where I had money and bought clothes on trips out but had nowhere to wear them, or I have lived in the city where there were places to go and I had clothes but no money.

Now I am in another situation. I have money and I have clothes and there are places to go and places to wear them, but I have gotten separated from my wardrobe. This happened because I decided to be a travelling nurse and I just kept travelling, leaving my clothes in Canada, New Mexico and Arizona.

Once my sister and I were invited to an exclusive New Year's Eve party at the home of the British consul-general to Vancouver. It was the sort of home where names had to be checked ahead of time and guests were frisked at the door for security reasons. What an opportunity to meet the *beau monde*!

That afternoon I accidentally locked myself out of my apartment and my landlady was not due back until the next day. I phoned my sister, who said she would bring me a dress, and we arranged to meet at a friend's enroute. I would have loved to ransack Debbie's illustri-

ous wardrobe and all the accessories, given half a chance. I imagined any number of little dresses she could have brought me, and surely she would not overlook the jewelry to compliment the outfit.

What she brought was a flesh-pink dress I had never seen her wear and no accessories whatsoever. It was too tight. I looked like a pork sausage. I was barefoot, as the outfit did not include shoes or stockings. I spent the evening in a corner near the food and drinks table, consoling myself with caviar and champagne.

As I sat there contemplating the unfairness of it all, it occurred to me that perhaps it was revenge exacted upon me after all these years. When my sister went to Australia, and her huge trunk of clothes was in my possession (these were all her worldly goods, I might add), I came upon a child's diary, the kind with a lock (but no key).

It did not take much to pry that diary open. What I read was, "I'm mad at Cheryl. She got a new dress and won't let me try it on ... Cheryl has ski pants and I am not allowed to borrow them ... Cheryl is selfish because she won't let me borrow her clothes ..."

When we were children, I was unaware of the emotions associated with my wardrobe. It all came clear to me. She wrote her feelings down and bided her time until just the right moment. This was that moment of sweet revenge.

Now my sister is getting married. I bought a stack of glossy American bride magazines and enjoyed leafing through them and flagging all the dresses I would like to wear to her wedding. I mailed the magazines to Debbie along with the generous offer that I would not mind if she borrowed my wedding dress (I got it at the Sally Ann for twenty dollars and I have only worn it once).

Now if I could only arrange for her to be barefoot.



photo by Menno Fieguth

Cheryl Fieguth (above, left) is a nurse and writer living in New Mexico. Her sister, Debra Fieguth, married on June 21, responds to this article with, "She's exaggerating, as usual."

## Cinnamon Rolls and Prayer ..... by Marge Warkentin

I had a spiritual sister once. We prayed and laughed together. We cried, and discussed our closest relationships with each other. We shared our goals for improving those relationships. Ours was a relationship of accountability and encouragement. We walked through some dark valleys together. We loved each other.

I remember the day God brought Debbie and me together. We were both buying groceries at the Co-op. Our life-path had brought each of us to Flin Flon, Manitoba, along with our husbands who pastored churches. The discussion of weather and activities that day evolved into a sharing of struggles and feelings.

"Let's meet again - do you want to come over?"

And so our trek together began.

I discovered that Debbie had been asking God for a friend. Conflict and misunderstandings within our church had caused me to realize the importance of having a "sister," someone to call on for support and prayer. God answered our prayers and met our needs, through each other.

Throughout the next four years our friendship grew. Ours was not a social, do-things-together relationship. We met in one of our homes or the local A&W to share our dreams, confess our sins, explain our struggles, and pray.

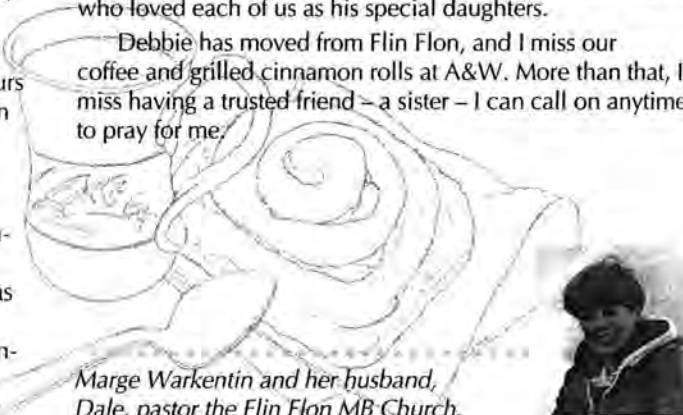
Our church situations were very different. Debbie's church was larger and well-established. Many of the parishioners had a lengthy history within the church; traditions, programs, and habits had been established. Our church was small, quite young, and still searching and experimenting with God's way of organizing the church. Very few parishioners had a long faith-story; we dealt with many family and relationship issues. So as Debbie and I worked through our

separate issues, though our role in the church was the same, our experiences, struggles and joys were very different.

Our home realities varied greatly, as well. Debbie and her husband had no children while Dale and I had two, both in elementary school at that time. I learned about the frustration of childlessness and coping with a very busy husband. Family issues I unburdened onto Debbie included how to maintain a meaningful relationship with a child whose main interests were computers and video games, and how to remain sane and spiritual within a busy household that included Dale's office. As we encouraged each other, we grew in our understanding of ourselves and each other.

Through the years, opportunities to support and encourage each other included the death of a parent, church conflicts, a miscarriage, and figuring out God's will in a pending move. We listened and asked questions of each other, and then prayed, committing each other to our Father who loved each of us as his special daughters.

Debbie has moved from Flin Flon, and I miss our coffee and grilled cinnamon rolls at A&W. More than that, I miss having a trusted friend - a sister - I can call on anytime to pray for me.



Marge Warkentin and her husband, Dale, pastor the Flin Flon MB Church.

Illustration: E. Vensel

## Between Sisters

by Katie Dirks

I come from a family of five sisters, of which I am the eldest. There's a special bond between sisters that no amount of time or distance can erase. Much of our closeness, I have to say, has come about as we've grown older, and often through remembering incidents (mostly hilarious) of our youth!

Two stories spring to mind when I think of having sisters.

My sister Esther and I shared a bedroom through most of our high school years. We took turns turning off the light before bed - somebody always had to get out of bed and return to it in the pitch dark. On this particular night, I knew it was Esther's turn to switch off the light so I kindly suggested I was tired and perhaps she could do her duty. She maintained it was my turn

and she wasn't doing it! I quietly demurred and pointed out the error of her thinking.

To make a L-O-N-G story short, that light stayed on until 3 AM or so. I don't remember who finally turned it off but since I'm telling the story let's say it was me and she still owes me for that one!

The other story is not funny. Recently my brother-in-law Andy was in the hospital one-and-a-half weeks with a potentially life-threatening illness. My baby sister, Leona, his wife, spent most of her waking hours there with him.

My sister Joanne said to me, "Leona can't be at the hospital alone. What if she gets bad news from the doctor - she can't be left alone."

And so she wasn't. Between Joanne, Ruth, Esther and me, one of us was with Leona nearly all the time Andy was in the hospital. We laughed together and we cried together and we prayed together and often we just were together.

I know that if I was facing a crisis my sisters would come and be with me. We complain about and to each other, we laugh at and with each other, we pray with and for each other. These women are more than sisters - they are friends!

Katie Dirks and her husband, Ray, attend Jubilee Mennonite Church in Winnipeg. They have two daughters, Lauren and Alexa.



# Reconnecting

## Siblings

by Merrill Unger

My sister is shorter than I am and younger, and darker, although nature is quickly altering that as we compete for silver strands. We are told by our children that we look alike. Sometimes when I walk into situations where we are both known, I am called Dorothy. I remember her small son once mistaking me for his mommy. It felt good. Our grandmother used to call her *die kleine* ("the small one") and me *die grosze* ("the big one") because she was still a wee girl and I was beginning to add adolescent pounds.

We have shared a few things over the years: our bedroom, our double bed, our big dolls, our birth month and birthday cakes. We also shared a two-year nightmare farming experience, and during that time we both gave birth to more-than-ten-pound babies, born one month apart.

But my overwhelming sense is that, as an older sister, I lived my life and was seldom aware of her. Today, as I watch my two daughters, whose age difference is similar to that between my sister and me, I wonder if she wished that I would have included her sometimes. I know her as a caring person, witty, hard-working, intelligent. And even though her chosen path has been different from mine, we understand each other. We have the same relationship base. It is easy with her. She is not upset by what I do because she knows where it is coming from.

### Siblings: Powerfully Bonded

The relationship between siblings is long-lasting. It is a powerful bond. It has great potential for support, but also for rivalry and struggle. Jane Mersky Leder, in her book *Brothers and Sisters: How They Shape our Lives*, suggests that the sibling relationship is the only intimate connection that lasts for a lifetime. Our friends move away, our co-workers are forgotten, our children leave, our marriages break up, our parents die, but our sisters and brothers have potential to be constant from the beginning of our lives to the end.

Our siblings knew us as children. They share our history and validate our memories. We are bonded by these things to our siblings even when we have cut ourselves off and are no longer speaking to one another.

It is because of this bond that sibling relationships are worth mending. "In a world of stress, insecurity, strife and rapid change, the endurance of the sibling relationship can serve as an essential means of support" (Leder), spiritual, emotional and practical.

It is possible to make a case for the special significance of sister relationships as opposed to those of siblings in general. It is said that older women who have strong sister ties are less likely to be depressed; they feel the world to be a safer place. Women have been the traditional "kin-keepers," the ones who keep the family together and the relationships functioning. They are sometimes viewed as the relationship "experts." Often they are better at expressing personal feelings and inner experiences. This, combined with a shared history, should make the sister-to-sister bond uniquely close and intense.

A look at biblical sister relationships reveals a very human picture. The intensity is there, but not necessarily the harmony. The most notorious is the story of Rachel and Leah, which, as described in Genesis 29-31,

begins with competition for a man and ends with competition for children. Rachel gained one son through her servant Bilhah because she was unable to conceive her own children. She named him Naphtali because, "With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister, and I have prevailed" (Gen. 30:8 NRSV). Agreement between them is recorded when they ask for their father's estate (31:14-15), but overall the relationship is characterized by conflict and jealousy, scheming and manipulation. Yet through all the struggle, tradition sees them as together having

"built up the house of Israel" (Ruth 4:11).

The story of Martha and Mary is more positive. The two sisters share living accommodations and a common love for Jesus, but they are pictured in conflict over roles.

### Mending Sibling Relationships

It becomes evident in the Scriptures as in everyday life that siblings suffer the same fits and starts as other relationships. Human relationships operate with bumps in the road, some better, some worse, but all in need of grace. "Let us then pursue what makes for peace," states Romans 14:19. This is not "peace at any price" but doing what it takes to rebuild a relationship. According to Leder, "Compromise, a sense of humor and a strong sense of self are important tools to help brothers and sisters reconnect."

The first step is courageously to make that first call and place the invitation. Then begin to ask the questions never asked before: "What was it like for you, growing up in our family? What has it been like to be my sister?"

*The relationship  
between siblings  
is long-lasting.  
It is a powerful bond.*



We'll need to bring along our best communication skills: listening respectfully, making clear statements about emotional issues without judging, asking for forgiveness, being willing to forgive, compromising, keeping at it even if it causes anxiety, with the expectation that harmony and understanding will be rebuilt. Sister (and brother) relationships are worth mending, not only to regain an important support base, but also to heal the wounds of the past and gain a healthier perspective for the future.

My sister and I have never had a close relationship, nor have we had conflict. We don't call each other every week or every month. But the things we share – our history, our common experiences and even our differences – are a good basis on which to build. And I believe that if disaster struck and I was alone, destitute, miserable, poor and naked, I could call my sister and she would be there for me.

*Merrill Unger lives in Brandon, Manitoba, where she is a counsellor at the Westman Interfaith Counselling and Education Centre. She and her husband attend the Richmond Park MB Church.*



## *The same... but Different*

by Lorie Battershill

Last year I had a request for a picture of me to go along with a piece of writing in a magazine. The only appropriate photo I could find was a picture of myself with my sisters, taken when we had a three generation family photo done two years ago. When the magazine people received the photo they called and asked, "Which one is you?" I couldn't believe it! How could they not tell which one was me? They claimed that we looked like triplets.

Sometimes it's like that when you're growing up in a family of all sisters. Everyone focuses on the sameness. Same gender. Same

eyes. Same upbringing and expectations. But living in an all-girl family taught me more about being different than it did about being the same.

I noticed this especially when I had same-gender children of my own. Mothers who had a boy and a girl tended to ascribe all the differences between them to gender. Well, my first two children were boys and the differences between them, right from birth, couldn't have been more dramatic. Having that experience made me really appreciate that every individual is a unique creation. The diversity among us is infinitely complex.

That's probably the most important thing I learned, growing up as one of "the four Sawatzky sisters." We walk through life together. We share experiences. But how those experiences affect us will be unique for each one. When I meet someone new I try to look for that part of their personality where I can connect. It's not that important to me that they should be just the same as I am. Differences are really the most interesting part.

## Ode to Sisterhood

by Eleanor Martens



I have just returned from a blissful week on the West Coast celebrating what the four of us have come to call our "solace of sisters." Is it possible that only a week ago I was being served freshly-squeezed orange juice in bed, hovering nightly over a candlelight dinner prepared by one of four (well, maybe three) gourmet cooks and falling asleep to the sound of girlish hoots, giggles and thumps coming from the next room, just like the old days? It did feel like a pajama party, a nonstop one – seven days of feasting, sleeping, and simply basking in the luxury of one another's soothing, generous presence.

We weren't great as tourists. A few obligatory jaunts to the beaches and shops of our oceanside refuge and we were ready to return to where the real treasure was – at home among the tangibles and intangibles of our sacred circle. Each of us brings to these events some special gift or marker telling of a recent body or soul adventure. This time it was sage from Montana, pretty stones from Alaska, Japanese kimonos, African batiks, a cedar box for momentos and a decorated folder for all the items we would exchange – thoughts, books, recipes, poems.

Our conversations encompass the world but most often come back to our lives as women and the people and ideas that enrich (and complicate!) them. Our joint passions – cooking, gardening, music and especially reading are dominant themes. But how we love to explore the "inner spaces," the brights and shadows of our personal and communal journeys.

Together we reconstruct the family narrative, pondering the mysterious links between past and present, our adult selves and our mythical childhoods. What has made us who we are? How can we learn from each other, grow and become better people? A crisis will cloud at least one life (proclaimed silently by one sib several years back when she stepped off the plane wear-

*A storm is coming*

*And I hear the far-off fields say things*

*I can't bear without a friend*

*I can't love without a sister.*

*Rainer Maria Rilke*

ing a "coat of mourning"). We commiserate and try to sort it out, but before long we're back to laughing, teasing and reflecting playfully on our foibles as children, those of our parents and the shocking seriousness of our adult lives. The pool of wisdom that surfaces from our vast repertoire of life experiences astonishes and sometimes transforms us.

We have come to long for the sustenance provided by our bi-annual retreat, this middle-age solidarity having caught us somewhat by surprise – an unexpected grace flung from some foreshadowing store of intimacy and connectedness we did not know existed but now leaving us transfixed and yearning for more.

It could have gone the other way. As youth we fought often and hard and knew the most tender nerve to strike. Only yesterday it seems I knocked out one sister's front tooth in a frenzied attempt to gain control over "my" half of the bed. And how many times did she infuriate me by going off to school in my best clothes? Her prettiness, her smartness, her popularity always diminished me. Then there was the time she stole my boyfriend.... As we grew older our rapidly-diverging lifestyles and world views seemed to erect harsh and impenetrable barriers between us.

How can she now be the one who sends me thoughtful gifts and letters, shares with me her deepest secrets and calls me "her Same and her Other"? What is this mysterious process that sheds old rivalries, heals ancient wounds and turns the fierce flames of juvenile angst into something we now laugh at? When did we start relishing our differences while delighting in the myriad threads of sameness we see coursing through us all?

We pondered this one night as we gathered around the friendship candle and discovered it is easier to

It is easier  
to savor  
sister-love  
than to  
describe it.

savour sister-love than to describe it. There is a mystique about it springing from deep wells of affection and disaffection. We agreed, however, that it is grounded very simply (yet profoundly) in love and respect.

Being more mature helps too. Now that we're all grown and in command of our own resources and strengths, we need no longer be rivals. None of us feels diminished by the other's growth. Also, among us there is no one individual who is more dysfunctional, addicted or needy than the others, therefore making unfair and disproportional demands on the relationships. This allows us to enjoy more fully the delicate balance of give and take, leading and being led, soothing and being soothed, that characterizes our bond. We are a friendship of equals, thriving on commonality and on difference.

We concluded that we share a powerful primal bond, the bond of blood but also of a common past and a deep burgeoning knowledge of our cultural story. We

are, in essence, each other's most valued reference points throughout the various crossroads of our lives, summed up by Susan Cahill as "always the sense that one's sister is part of one's essential self, an eternal presence of heart and soul and memory" (*Among Sisters*).

When it comes to sisterhood, I realize I have been more richly blessed than some; and for that reason my internal censor tells me not to flaunt it. Yet not to share something so special would also be a loss, especially since women's relationships traditionally have not been regarded with great seriousness. Louise Berkinow observes: "We have died in each other's arms far more often than the romantic novel or cinema would have us believe" (*Among Women*). As I see it, the sister bond is one of the most meaningful lifetime relationships a woman can have. It should never be trivialized, underestimated or – untold.

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## Dear Edith:

My summer was the epitome of the year's misery. My questions about God and faith mounted as my cynicism grew. In September we moved to Pasadena and at the Seminary I requested a spiritual director. The Dean suggested you. Though I looked forward to meeting you, I was also afraid of being disappointed. I wasn't.

Your little home was almost hidden behind shrubs, but always inviting. You always greeted me warmly. I sat in your big easy chair, you facing me, close enough to make me feel good. How can I ever express enough gratitude for the hours I spent there with you? You listened to my "disappointment with God." You let me cry, and you never suggested that I was unspiritual. Those were precious gifts at a time when I needed them.

You talked about prayer, trust, acceptance. I went through the Gospels noting the verses that included these words. That was a healing exercise.

You would ask me if I wanted you to pray before I left and I always said yes. You stood behind me as I sat and with your hands on my shoulders you talked to God for me and about me. I could feel the energy, the strength and the healing that came

from God through your hands. That is exactly what I was taught in my clinical training: "There is healing in touch." You shared with me once how much energy it took from you when you prayed for another. Thank you, Edith.

It was hard to say goodbye in June when we left. I knew you had struggled with cancer for years and I wasn't sure I would see you again. I wrote to you regularly and you wrote back. That was a bonus. And then there was nothing. I knew even before your friend called that you had died.

I knew you less than a year, and one more year through letters. Only two years in my three score plus twelve. Yet the impact you left on my life cannot be measured. Thank you, Edith.

Love,

Mary

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Mary Regehr is a counsellor at Recovery of Hope in Winnipeg. She and her husband, John, attend the McIvor Avenue Mennonite Brethren Church.



# My Sister's Dance

by Naomi Enns

I have many sisters – six biological ones to be exact. Each in her own way has given me gifts that have challenged me to grow within my faith, yet only one has given me the gift that will last a lifetime. The Gift? The dance of dying and living and letting go – and within that gift an experience that confirms God's faithful presence from birth to death and thereafter.

Last fall my sister Teresa, at 41, was diagnosed with adenocarcinoma of the lung, stage 4. My six sisters and I began a new, hard dance, the sister circle dance of letting go and of walking beside one who would soon face God eternally: the dance of Goodbye.

I remember the first words we shared after her diagnosis. She called and said, "I'm not afraid of dying, but I am afraid of the journey to that point. Can you help me?" Those words gave me my dance steps: I was to support her in her choices of therapy, to give her medical advice (as a nurse) and to be her sounding board. She didn't need me to visit just yet, other sisters were needed at that point. My part was played long distance for eight months – sharing her grief and living with the knowledge that my sister was dying.

After trying every option available, Teresa decided she was ready to begin her finale; she asked me to come. On the plane my tears ran wet and dry as I began my journey to the doors of death, not with a client but with a sister. Throughout the next week I was privileged to watch life and death greet, and new life and a new dance begin.

From the waterfall within sight of her bed and from the birds and deer that gathered near her window came an overwhelming sense that here amidst the approach of death was a place of peace, as if God, the Master Dancer, was leading Teresa along.

Our first moments were spent catching up and sharing memories of childhood. We laughed; then we spoke of the reality so close at hand. It was important to her that an order remain to her life and that siblings had come when she needed them. I felt honoured to be there, gaining wisdom from one so near to death. We spoke of how hard it was to let go of this stage of life and how one wished it would not last long. Her feet were weary of the steps. It is hard to help someone you love get ready to die.

It is hard to help someone you love get ready to die.

As I sat with her those last days I witnessed her mother-dance and watched many miracles unfold. Whenever her girls came to her her eyes would light up – a mouth that wouldn't eat for her husband or myself would open wide when daughter Heather (age 9) held the spoon. As her

youngest massaged her feet, I saw love shared in a sacred way. Her husband, John, as her dance partner, was right there supporting her too. I became a labour coach or a dance instructor who had left the sidelines to join the inner circle of dancers. We were all learning a new dance with Teresa taking the lead.

Two days prior to the end, my sister's restlessness in waiting for death changed and a peace came over all. At the dinner table the girls talked about the changes happening in the family and how things would be different. I explained that life never stays the same, that different isn't necessarily bad, just sometimes very hard. Carolyn (age 7) commented, "It's like learning a new dance isn't it?" These daughters began to lead us in the dance of letting go.

That night my sister gave her confession of faith as she said her last full sentence: "I'm not afraid." Her love of Christ sustained her in her last hours. She quietly prompted her family by saying her last word the following morning on Father's Day, "Tell," as she looked into her daughters' eyes. This message gave her husband courage to finish off as they had chosen, and together they picked out her final dance costume – her burial clothes.

That last day, June 16, the girls spontaneously each said goodnight and goodbye (which in its origin means "go be with God"). Then, alone and in great awe, John and I began the final steps of life with her. My sister died in her husband's arms as I committed her body to God. We witnessed the door of life open and felt the amazing presence of angels in attendance, as if we and they were ushering her through the door into the hands of God. Teresa's dance of life was over – the labour pains of death gone. As I danced the midwife dance, I witnessed new birth. It was and is still an overwhelming confirmation of God's presence in all of our moments of life.

To dance is to live, to dance is to die, to dance is to feel all of the in between. I witnessed this and more in

the six days I spent at my sister's bedside and at her burial. Teresa was not afraid to face what life brought her way; she danced graciously, working out her life and letting God lead her home. Through it all she bestowed on me a gift – moments to witness the dance

in its entirety. Her gift has strengthened my own dance, which is also changing.

My sisters and I are learning new steps around the one who has lain down on the dance floor, for grief takes many new and unknown steps.

We were all learning a new dance with Teresa taking the lead.



photo: Lis Vensel

Yet Teresa has given me a desire to continue, having witnessed firsthand that the Lord of the Dance will lead wherever we may find ourselves, both on and off the dance floor of life.

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*Naomi Enns is a community nurse who works with many palliative patients. She lives with her husband, Doug, and their three children in Victoria. They are members of Saanich Community Church.*

## A Gift for Thanksgiving

My old friend,  
 the one I talk to about flowers,  
 always tanned after a summer of gardening  
 today you are pale. Already  
 you find it difficult to swallow,  
 but your bright eyes  
 shine across the shadowy room.

I want to tell you  
 how lovely it is outside.  
 The leaves float so effortlessly  
 through the blue air,  
 gold pools under trees.

In the airless living room  
 the sheer curtains are tangled with light.  
 I look for signs of your handiwork  
 but even the African violets  
 are gone as if  
 you had made an important  
 turning  
 onto a path full of stones.

Your budgie prances around its cage  
 restless knocking over the mirror  
 making loud screeches. We talk of  
 childhood and gardens composting leaves  
 before the first bite of cold.

Motionless diminished  
 you sit back in your chair.  
 The close air  
 thick folds of curtains  
 surround you  
 as friends.

It's time to offer my gift  
 watch surprise  
 lighten your face.

Paper stripped off  
 the musky aroma of yellow chrysanthemums  
 floods the room.  
 Sunlight fresh air  
 and earth for your fingers  
 to touch  
 before the long  
 slow fire of decay.

I search your face for answers  
 but see  
 only your patient,  
 soft eyes.

The beginning  
 gold of gardens.

.....  
*Barbara Slater is a Winnipeg poet.  
 She and her husband, Jim, attend St. Aidens Anglican Church.*

# To My Sisters Beyond the Wall

by Marianne Ewert Worcester

My dear sisters,

I write to you from "beyond the wall" of the communities of MBs – an exile. I am your historic/cultural sister in blood and bone, but I am now of the tribe of those expelled from that community who have found permanent residence in "Egypt." I was excommunicated.

It stuns me momentarily to write these words. I have never seen them in print. I have spoken them, hesitantly, to several people lately to see how they sound; they roll around like stones in my mouth ... then the sudden tug at old scar tissue around the heart, the shock to the mind, the prick of tears, the wanting it not to be so.

But this is the story I must now tell, the one that is the hardest. I am obligated to myself to try to understand something that has lived in the shadowy hallways of my life and needs to be blessed. I am obligated to you because sisterhood is both personal and political. If it is to be a model for love in the twenty-first century, we must learn how to turn our dross into gold, our difficult stories into grist for our daughters' mills. If we don't tell our



truths, how will they set us free? I have a disinherited younger self who wishes to be heard. I tell this to you, my sisters, so that we can gather up all of our fragments and place them on the altar of God's grace, to be healed, to be transformed into something larger and more beautiful than we think we deserve.

I am writing to you in the 25th year of the event of my excommunication from a large Mennonite Brethren church in Winnipeg. This month is also my 25th wedding anniversary: these two paradigmatic events are linked by propinquity and forever knotted together in my soul; a macabre coming together of joy and pain, gain and loss, drastic end and tenuous beginning. (Was it this "hard pruning" at the beginning of the marriage that ensured

flowering and hardiness beyond expectation?) This is how I remember it.

It was 1972 and I was living dreamily, thoughtlessly, through the heart when I fell in love with a young graduate student. He was experiencing his first encounter with Christian community while recovering from a contrived and short-lived marriage that had wounded him deeply. We were involved with an exciting group of "hippie" Christians and Jesus People who had gathered around Dr. John White and Church of the Way, and were experimenting with communal living and new forms of worship (which seem so tame today).

I was busy translating my grandfather's memoirs from German into English, reading liberal theology, and systematically studying the Bible in its New English Version, particularly working in the Psalms. We were involved in Bible studies at the University and went on weekend trips with IVCF to Pioneer Camp.

I never for a moment imagined a life outside of a faith community, no matter how critical we were of the

church's institutional forms and the structures in which I felt uncomfortable. The church was and is for me a beloved place, like home, where it only irritates as much as it sustains; I could never abandon it.

And yet my church – the one in which I had been raised, the one that had applauded my accomplishments, nurtured my spiritual growth, poured the oil of its bounty on me – no longer wanted me. It seemed that I had sinned irrevocably by intending to marry a man who had

been married once before, even though the breakup of that marriage was beyond his control.

In the week that we were to be married I was called in to be interrogated by the pastor. In the midst of dress fittings, feverish food preparations, meeting my in-laws for the first time and encouraging my timorous husband-to-be, I had to endure a terrible hour in the pastor's study. Bible passages were lobbed at me like grenades, out of context and without charity. I dodged, I parried to the best of my knowledge, attempting to persuade him of our commitment to each other and the Christian community. But it seemed a *fait accompli*, a farce, a thing already settled.



Were we that frightening in our long skirts, sandals and love beads? Did I personally pose a threat to my people? Was I leading others astray with my unconventional Christianity? Didn't they know how much I loved them, how much I relished the uniqueness of our history, our faith, our stance in the world? What a faithful daughter I had been in the house of our fathers?

Trembling with shock and outrage, I swam to the surface, and as I walked the few short blocks home, I heard the distinct clank of gates closing permanently behind me. The end of life in the Garden, the end of careless belief in the enduring nature of community, the end of naivete.

We carried on with the wedding. I couldn't now be married in my home church, but in the simplicity of the College chapel my quietly-grieving, ever-faithful parents gave me away to a stranger who said he would love me for the rest of his life. Until then, I had always known who I was.

I was never formally notified of the church meeting that resulted in the vote for my expulsion. I know that relatives, old friends of the family, Sunday-School mates, must have raised their hands for the final "yes" or the vote would not have passed. A year later I heard it casually mentioned and felt the blow sink deep, burying itself like a splinter in my core.

My people did not want me – the flailing, sensual, intelligent, wildly-loving hippie me with my "undisciplined squads of emotion" and my passion for truth in experience. "Excommunicant" might as well have been a pronouncement of *in nihilo*.

Inside me there still lives that vulnerable young Mennonite woman-self who heard the message that she was not good enough ... to be part of her community of faith, her blood, her history, her cultural home. She had not measured up; she had failed. And now she was a refugee, forced out of her homecountry, like her mother and grandmother. She could never go back.

I unlearned the primary language of *gemeinschaft* and became fluent in the second language of *gesellschaft*. Grieving in secret, unconsciously nursing a sense of second-class citizenship, I developed a slight "allergy" to institutional Christianity, which still keeps me on the periphery. Questions of identity and community became more academic and less personal, the pain of dislocation and homesickness eased as time passed and life filled up. But I had sustained a mortal wound and it had a power that I was not aware of.

The sojourn in "Egypt" has been rich with experience. We built a community, found meaningful work, raised three children, lived good lives, turned to each other for comfort in a "strange land." Those threads of our difficult beginning – failed marriage, excommunication, loss of identity – braided our life into something supple and durable. We formally reaffirmed our marriage vows this

month, in the midst of family and friends.

We have found a home in the Anglican communion where we say the liturgy with other spiritual and denominational refugees, with doubters and outcasts and those who can't express their experience of the richness of Christ in the more confessional streams of Christianity. I make and serve sandwiches there to the homeless, the dispirited, the dispossessed, who line up every morning at the church doors (in the middle of the richest city in Canada) to get their daily bread. I stand among them. I see myself in them. We are all hungry for the bread of life and we all thirst for streams of living water. There is no line in the sand that says, you may come in here and you may not.

This community of faith is a spacious place; it flourishes in its diversity, welcomes the stranger, and participates in the Great Conversation of the Church with all faiths. It is my home away from home. But though my family has been baptised into it, I have yet to become an Anglican. I am an Anabaptist, a Mennonite Brethren, and I could never deny my roots. But in this life I sojourn in an in-between place. I have begun to see how the margins, the intertidal zones, are also a kind of "home." From here, you sometimes get perspective.

In fact, I feel in midlife I am beginning the quiet journey Home. But this Home I'm coming to is a much wider, deeper place than any historic community. In it, the earth is my dwelling place, all of its lovely, outrageous, diverse forms are my siblings, God is our true *Yabban/Yaman*\* and I am her true daughter, the apple of her eye. In this home there are no insiders and outsiders; we are all one in the unity of the Spirit.

I have forgotten the first language of my MB life. I have lost touch with the people, the grammar, the way of it. But my inner homing device is still set to that dial. When it signals activity, I gravitate in that direction. A gathering of MBs compels and terrorizes me. After all these years I feel as though the word "excommunicant" is emblazoned on my forehead, a permanent stigmata on my psyche. You would never know this by looking at me, and I have never told this to anyone – before.

Your sister,  
Marianne Ewert Worcester

[\*Hebraic term for Mother/Father God used in the Lord's Prayer in one of the mass settings at Christ Church Cathedral.]

Marianne Ewert Worcester teaches English at Langara Community College in Vancouver. She and her family attend Christ Church Cathedral.

# CROSSING THE BOUNDARIES

*We live in a world of many cultures. Those of us who travel sometimes find ourselves among people whose way of seeing things is so different from our own that we feel confused and long for the familiar. But love crosses the boundaries, and then we discover our world enlarged and our understanding deepened. The following three articles explore that experience.*



P. Karuna Shri Joel

## A Tribute

P. Karuna Shri Joel  
1964-1996

by Lori Matties

P.M. Shiny Susan and Zoe Matties were both eight years old. They became instant friends, and for the five days our family visited the Mennonite Brethren Centenary Bible College in Shamshabad, India, last March, they were inseparable. Zoe even spent two days at school with her newfound friend.

We had come to the college so that my husband, Gordon, could give some lectures and chapel talks and so that we could meet the students and faculty of our "sister" MB College in India. And to our delight, in spite of huge differences in lan-

guage and culture, we found we shared a kinship there that transcended barriers. I gained a whole new understanding of the words Mennonite Brethren.

Shiny's father, Menno Joel, is a professor of Christian Ministry at the Bible College. Menno welcomed us not only into his home but also into his life and his grief over the loss of his wife, P. Karuna Shri Joel, and their infant daughter Sneha in a tragic accident in July, 1996. We were indeed privileged to spend time with him and to share in his sorrow and learning to live without the very special woman who was his wife and companion.

Menno and Karuna were partners in ministry. Both were teachers at the College. Both were active in church and community. It seems, from my viewpoint, that Karuna was taken from us too soon – a young woman of 32 who had already contributed much to the Mennonite Brethren ministry in India. But my understanding is small, and I cannot pretend to understand how the grace of God will show itself through this experience.

Karuna was a Christian sister I wish I could have known. Indeed, as we listened to Menno and others at the College, I began to understand that she was a very special person who obeyed God's call to serve the church with her gifts of intelligence and compassion. In tribute to her, and to the gift of friendship that was given to us by Menno and his children, I would like to share with you some of the events and accomplishments of her life.

Born in 1964, Karuna was the first child of S.S. Krupaiah and B.D. Kanthamma, both teachers in MB high schools in India. She was a bright child who excelled in her school work. After high school she attended the MB Bible Institute in Shamshabad and it was there she heard the call of God to further her training in Biblical studies. Though no MB woman had followed this path before her, she obeyed the call and completed a Bachelor of Theology, a Bachelor of Divinity (equivalent to our MDiv.) and a Master of Theology.

From the time of their marriage in 1985 (arranged by their parents), Karuna and Menno entered into ministry together, beginning in the rural mission station at Nagarkurnool where Karuna worked especially with young people, encouraging them to become involved in Sunday school ministry. From there they moved on to complete their masters degrees and to teach at the Mennonite Brethren Centenary Bible College.

***I cannot pretend  
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experience.***



Karuna saw a great need in the church for a deeper understanding of Scripture, and particularly for a rethinking of its understanding of the role of women. She wished to encourage women to find places in the church to use their talents and gifts. For that reason, although there is not yet a place for women in the MB Church in India to preach, Karuna studied Homiletics and became a teacher of Homiletics at the Bible College. She had an extraordinary ability to challenge her brothers and sisters in the church with grace and intelligence.

Karuna also served on the Executive Committees of the All India Council of Christian Women, the MB Women's Conference and the Andra Pradesh Non-government Organization for AIDS prevention and education. In 1995 she was appointed Editor-in-Chief of the national MB church monthly magazine, *Suvarthamani*, for which she wrote articles for women and children along with other editing tasks.

Karuna was a loving and creative mother of three children, encouraged by a supportive husband and parents. She motivated young people to faithfulness and ministry. And, in a time when women are seeking new ways to understand their roles in culture and in the church, she was a leader and an example to all. The MB Church in India, and indeed in the world, has been graced by her short presence. She is greatly missed.

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*As a part of his tribute to her, and to carry on in the ministry that was important to her, Menno has begun a scholarship fund that will help MB women in India to enter theological study. If you would like to contribute to this fund, please contact Lori Matties, care of Sophia.*

*(Photo of Karuna and excerpt, right, from All Are Witnesses: a Collection of Sermons by Mennonite Brethren Women, Delores Friesen, ed. Kindred Press, 1996. Used with permission.)*

## DO THIS ONE THING

by Karuna Joel

Jesus plainly explains the cost of discipleship in Mark 8:34, "If anyone would come after me he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." The word "if" is an open invitation, there is no force in Jesus' gentle call. "If anyone" also shows the importance of each one's decision.

When Jesus calls us and gives us an option to choose, he calls us with a definite purpose and gives us assurance. Therefore the call of God inspires us to decide. The prophet Isaiah, in spite of his inability, decided to go when he felt the touch of God and said, "Here am I. Send me." (Is. 6:7,8) Our God is a God of the possible and therefore our response should be positive. The second step is denying and emptying oneself. Denying oneself is the starting point of the cost of discipleship. As we "take up the cross and follow" we will be guided through.

Jesus chose disciples who were young and energetic. They had enthusiasm and accepted the challenge to give their lives. Today, some of the young and energetic are very insensitive and do not respond to Jesus' call.

I am one of the products of missionary work here in India. The place where I was born, brought up and am living at presently is called the "Mission Compound." If no missionaries had come to India over one hundred years ago, I would have been born into a different situation altogether. I would not have been what I am now. To put it briefly, I became a Christian, because I believed; I believed because I heard. I heard because someone preached; someone preached because they decided to come to India with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Therefore God gives us similar responsibilities. It was the strong convictions of the missionary workers which led me to become a full-time minister. And likewise today there are many people whose duty it is to carry on the task.

Dear brothers and sisters, we have the message of life. Don't withhold it from those who need it. Let us decide to go out and reach those who have never heard.



## OVERCOMING THE BARRIERS

by Christine Enns

I find it interesting how one sees things differently when looking back on an event. The experiences and feelings at the time are so immediate that sometimes one may feel overwhelmed. Then, when there is time to think and look back, the experience becomes a positive influence.

Maybe that is what visiting India was for me – overwhelming with a positive impact. Only through reflecting on my experiences can I understand how, through the grace of God, those positives happened, even with my barriers.

On my first day in India I wrote in my journal, "I feel lost, I am a scared bird lost in another world." Culture shock had hit me hard. My comfort zone had been invaded all at once and I could not rationalise what was happening to me. I was on overload, so I put up a barricade in my mind. I looked through a tunnel so I would not see or feel everything I was experiencing. I fully realized what I was doing; it was my survival technique. The barricade was not always up. There were times when I was delightfully surprised.

My tour group had been travelling for a week and a half when we arrived in Shamshabad. We had taken an overnight train to Hyderabad and spent the day touring nearby villages. I was not feeling well, and the only thing I wanted was time alone and a good sleep. The problem was, we were to be billeted out for the night at a local family's home. I thought to myself, "There goes my time alone and a good sleep."

I was not looking forward to being sociable. My barriers were up; I did not want to experience any more "India."

My travel companion and I were driven to the family's home. When we arrived, the first person to greet us

was the father of the household. After introducing ourselves to the rest of the family, Mary, a niece of the father, showed us our room. I was surprised to see two beds in a large, spacious room. Mary explained how to open the shutters, light our mosquito coil and lock the door. We quickly realized Mary was the one who served in this household.

We ate the evening meal with the father, which was a privilege. Mary served us and made sure we had plenty to eat. While the family gathered in our room to look at pictures from Canada, Mary got hot water ready for our bucket baths. With careful instructions, she explained how to use the bucket bath. Mary made sure our needs were met.

It was through this young woman's simple caring for my needs that my barricades came down. I was surprised at my enjoyment of being in communion with this family.

The evening was filled with curious talk about each other's countries. We read Scripture together, first in English and then in Telugu. We prayed and sang together. By the time the evening was done I was tired but content.

It is interesting how a young woman's simple caring could let me see with different eyes the beauty and enjoyments of India. I realize through this experience that I can't handle everything. It is through God's grace that the barriers I set up can be brought down and I can see beauty amidst the things I do not want to see.

***Maybe this  
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*Christine Enns is a childcare worker in Winnipeg and a member of River East MB Church. She spent last January touring India and attending the Mennonite World Conference.*

# *In Zambia My Sister Is...*

by Janet P. Schmidt

"So what will your sister's child be to you?" I asked twelve-year-old Theresa Katepe. She looked confused for a moment and then exclaimed, "She will be my daughter!" There was more than a tinge of exasperation in her voice. How could the *musungu* (white person) know so little? It was clear to her – just as she and the mother were sisters, so their children would be each other's daughters and sons and they in turn would be sisters and brothers.

In Canada we use the word "sisters" to identify a variety of relationships, the most frequent being those within the immediate family and within the church. In Zambia and many parts of Africa the term is used in the above relationships and more. The most significant additional use in Zambia is that the word "sisters" includes the girl children of my mother's sisters and my father's brothers. This should not be confused with the girl children of my mother's brothers and father's sisters; those are cousins. One can see the difference between a cousin and a sister by watching their interaction. If someone is being teased, she is a cousin, if not, she is a sister.

I was sitting in a funeral house and saw a group of young women sitting in a circle. Another young woman arrived and wanted to break into the circle. I watched with discomfort (for the young woman) and curiosity (how was this going to be resolved?). The woman sitting next to me leaned towards me and simply explained that the young woman outside the circle was a cousin and needed to be teased before she would be allowed in the circle. It didn't take long before the circle opened with everyone's relationships reaffirmed – there were sisters and there were cousins. It was important that everyone knew their place.

That experience reminded me of times when I had wanted to speak to someone and found her engrossed in a conversation with her sisters. They had obviously not spoken to each other for a significant period of time (hours at least). They were intent on the conversation and oblivious to everyone around. They were catching up and enjoying each other's company.

Yes, sisters are important and special. Those of us who have them take them for granted. Those of us who don't – well we occasionally watch, wishing for what might have been.

In an economy as vulnerable as Africa's, family is important. It is a source of support and comfort. It is a source of assistance, whether that be to send my children to school or to buy some mealie meal and relish to feed my family. A broad definition of family in a third world country can be good for everyone, especially those in need.

I had been in Zambia for about six months. One of my teaching colleagues called out to me from her office. "My sister..." she began. There was something heart-warming in those words. There I was, thousands of miles away from my family. The first six months had been more lonely than I expected and now my colleague was acknowledging our relationship in a new way. We were work-mates and friends and now we are sisters!

***A broad  
definition  
of family  
can be good  
for everyone.***

*Janet P. Schmidt, works as a Peace Education Lecturer for the Mindolo Ecumenical Foundation in Kitwe, Zambia. She and her husband, Dave S. Pankratz, are on a three-year assignment with the Mennonite Central Committee.*



### A Brother Among Them

by Jim Pankratz

Seven years ago, on the weekend of my mother's eightieth birthday, my sisters and I went out for dinner together for the first time ever. No parents, no spouses and children; just the six of us. I rediscovered my sisters that weekend.

In recent years my sisters, who all live in southern Ontario, have made an annual tradition out of a weekend together. Last year I joined them and they celebrated my fiftieth birthday. We cooked a meal together, watched slides of our "growing up years," told stories, went out for dinner, attended *Phantom of the Opera*, stayed in a bed-and-breakfast near High Park in Toronto, browsed through an antique market and criss-crossed Toronto Island on old rented bicycles.

I have five sisters. Ruth is two years older than I am. Martie is 18 months younger, followed by Carrie two

on buttons and darn socks, embroider, knit (and pearl), plant a garden, pull weeds (and weeds, and more weeds) and pick vegetables and fruit. My dad had a woodshop in the basement, and we all helped with some of the simple procedures in making doors and windows.

There were differences. I was responsible for cutting the lawn while we had only a push mower. I never learned to sew (beyond putting a seam onto burlap curtains for my apartment in university) and my sisters are very good at it. I don't play piano, and some of my sisters are very competent pianists. I did projects on the lathes, drills and saws in our basement with boys from the neighbourhood, but my sisters didn't. We all played table games, but I was the only one my dad taught to play chess as long as I lived at home. When we played church as children I preached and my sisters played piano and sang. They complained that I preached too long.



years later, Velma 21 months later, and Sharon 21 months later. I remember them all as though they always existed, except Sharon. I remember when she was born, on my father's 47th birthday; his "birthday girl."

Growing up in a home full of sisters seems natural now; but I recall wishing for a brother or two when I was younger. I don't think I ever suggested trading in one or two of my sisters for brothers, although I've heard of children who made such offers after quarrels with a sibling. Our neighbourhood had lots of children, boys and girls. In all the other families each boy had at least one brother. Outside our home I spent nearly all of my time with boys, exploring the woods, fishing, building "hide-outs," playing baseball, hockey, basketball and football. The neighbourhood girls were "friends of my sisters" or "sisters of my friends."

We all learned to cook and clean, to can fruits and vegetables, to clean chickens and fish (hundreds and hundreds of smelt, until we couldn't bear to eat them), to sew

I now realize that there were other differences, and that although we grew up in the same family, my sisters, as girls and then women, experienced a different reality. We were silent about so much in those years. I am amazed now to recall that while I lived in our home I was unaware of the physical and emotional rhythms of a woman's life. I just knew that girls spent more time in the bathroom, especially when I wanted to get in.

Our realities were also different as we grew into adulthood. I decided where I would go to university and what I would study. One of my sisters hoped to study in Toronto, was strongly discouraged because Toronto was a dangerous place for a young woman, and never went.

My sisters gained something in our home environment that I missed, something that I greatly admire, which my father had in abundance. They are all creative and artistic. Ruth is a pianist and musician with a great eye for photography and a talent for home design. Martie worked in cake decorating and flower shops for many years.



Carrie sews, takes up nearly any craft at will and currently makes baskets that are remarkable creations. Velma has completed a degree in fine arts as an adult and paints watercolours the rest of us proudly frame. Sharon has spent most of her working career selling gift and decorator items and helping stores find creative ways of displaying them. Oh well; I've learned to listen to music with attention and delight, and to admire the artistry of paintings, crafts and good design.

My sisters have helped me to be at ease with women without romantic or sexual innuendo. Throughout my adult life I have had many friendships with women whose creativity, empathy, intelligence and energy have enriched my life. I am offended by demeaning comments about women, and burn with silent and sometimes spoken indignation when I see domineering men belittle their wives and humiliate their daughters.

***Growing up in a home full of sisters seems natural now; but I recall wishing for a brother or two when I was younger.***

My sisters helped prepare me for life with my wife Goldine and our two daughters, Carmen and Rachel. Their interests and friendships span the globe. They always do more than is required in their professions or in any project they get involved in. They take initiative. Carmen decorates for Christmas as creatively and enthusiastically as Goldine. Although I still do most of my sports with male friends, my first experience of roller-blading this summer was with Rachel, at her initiative. They are unique and creative women.

No wonder they love my sisters. No wonder my sisters love them.

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*Jim Pankratz is currently taking a study leave from Concord College, where he has just completed a term as President. He and Goldine attend McIvor MB Church in Winnipeg.*

## Letters

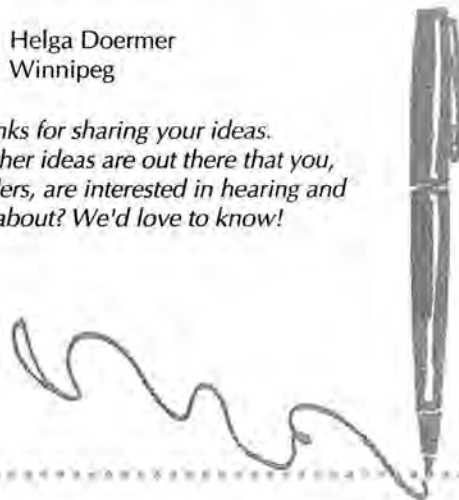
It is wonderful to be receiving your publication again. I've read "Life Writing" cover to cover, just as I have all the previous issues I have received. The story "Hidden Beauty" by Ruth E. Johnson is very touching. It is refreshing to hear someone talk about a practical, functional beauty that is too often overlooked.

I'm responding to your "We Need You!" notice (Spring 1997) and would like to share some ideas that have been running through my mind. Having been caught up for years in a profession and then with household roles, it wasn't until a few years ago that I realized that I no longer dreamed and aspired. Having awakened again, I view this as an essential part of living. I'd like to hear about other women's dream worlds, their visions, their aspirations, their struggles. Another idea that actually comes out of the Winter 1996 issue on life cycles is the idea of internal passages. That issue chronicles external

passages: birthing, post partum depression, menopause. I'd love to see something on the internal journeys women walk through. Just one more thought. I've been thinking about how we experience God. A few years ago, my son asked me how God talks to us. This is something I am still learning, and would like to hear how others experience God.

Helga Doermer  
Winnipeg

*Ed. Thanks for sharing your ideas. What other ideas are out there that you, the readers, are interested in hearing and writing about? We'd love to know!*





The North Kildonan *Nahe Verein* (sewing circle) met Wednesdays in the MB Church on Edison Ave in the mid forties. After travelling to a studio in their Sunday dresses the women posed seriously as was customary in Russia. Suffering, dispossessed family members in the old country were always on their minds, so their activities included Bible study and praying for their loved ones, and sewing quilts for refugees. They sent parcels sewn in a cloth wrapping and addressed with indelible pencil through the Mennonite Central Committee. Sharing letters from relatives and recipients of their generosity, they comforted and encouraged each other at their meetings.

Mrs Helena Dyck (second row, extreme right) remembered recently that they always addressed each other as sisters. She would cook borscht so that supper would be ready when she returned home from a meeting with the *Schwestern*. On arriving home from such a meeting, Helena Dyck was asked by her small daughter "Did you have fun, Mama?" She retorted, "Sewing circle is not about having fun!"

## SHELF LIFE

### The Work of Their Hands - Mennonite Women's Societies in Canada

by Gloria Neufeld Redekop, Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1996, 172 pp.

Reviewed by Margaret Harder

It is hard to estimate how many hours of painstaking research and writing have gone into this volume. *The Work of Their Hands* gives the history of women's *Vereine* (unions, societies, clubs) of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada (CMC) and the Canadian Mennonite Brethren (MB), formed in the churches begun in Canada from 1874 to 1952. Also included is data on these organizations reaching into the 1990s by means of surveys, minutes, reports, etc. A copy of the survey and the covering letter are included, as well as hundreds of notes, a lengthy bibliography and an index.

Redekop states her thesis at the outset: that the women's organizations, called by a variety of names reflecting their orientation and goals, became a parallel church, where

women could freely offer opinions, make decisions, have an outlet for service and assume leadership roles denied them by church authorities. She suggests that women were probably content with their role, not objecting to a male calling the *Verein* into being, conducting elections and, at times, giving the devotional. Redekop writes, "While for the most part Mennonite women accepted their role in the larger church institution, they made up for it in their own *Verein* meetings, in which, *de facto*, they conducted their own church." (p.51) Meetings consisted of prayer, worship, Bible study, fellowship and food. In the early years handwork such as knitting and crocheting was an integral part of each meeting. Auction sales



(which later fell into disrepute) of the handmade items raised funds that were then donated to various mission and church projects.

As Redekop develops her story it becomes evident that the role of feminism in society at large also played a role within the church. The author empathizes with the trends of increased freedom for women within the church, women gaining an education and a change of roles from being homemakers to being employed outside the home. In several instances she details remarks made by those who disapprove of or ridicule women's desires to be included and to be given unrestricted access to church positions. The "seeds of questioning" had been scattered and they bore fruit.

The 1970s and 1980s marked an era of decline in attendance at the women's meetings. The emphasis shifted from service to fellowship and spiritual growth of the members. The meetings remained biblically based and were carried on in much the same format as before – similar to a church service. Redekop notes that younger women lacked interest for a variety of reasons, such as holding jobs outside the home and being more involved in the church in roles hitherto not open to them. Redekop concludes with the words, "...it is difficult to predict what the future will hold for women in Mennonite women's societies who gave so much to the church through the work of their hands."

There are many other interesting details and ideas in the book, which make it a worthwhile read for anyone interested in history of any kind. Not all readers will agree with the author's perspective, but it gives food for thought to all women. As to the future, our creative God has means of introducing new directions and ways. The next century may be even more exciting for women's organizations than the one coming to a close.

## **In Her Own Voice: Childbirth Stories from Mennonite Women**

Katherine Martens and Heidi Harms, eds.  
University of Manitoba Press, 1997.

Reviewed by Agnes Dyck



*"Stories of the past show us how to deal with the present." K.F. Wiebe.*

*In Her Own Voice* contains interviews with twenty-six women who span three generations. Of particular interest to me were interviewees born in the period from 1900 to 1917. These older women have emerged from a context with a lively oral tradition. Granted, birth experiences were not openly discussed, but these older women knew their neighbours' stories. And here they appear to be clearly

enjoying the retelling of their stories. The editors have given them the luxury of being heard in a warmly accepting environment.

Some readers might not want to read these stories for fear that the accounts will remind them of their painful birth experiences, but most will thoroughly enjoy these intensely personal stories, identifying with and validating their personal memories of a life-changing event. What could be more delightful than the wry sense of humour of a Mennonite grandmother, Maria Reimer, describing her youthful attempts at getting her husband to understand her?

*He had authority over me, but if only he could understand me better! But what can you expect from a man who has never been pregnant? Or has never been a woman? And a woman is built differently. I sometimes think a woman should not expect too much from a man (38).*

Or reading about the joy of a young mother, Anna Fullerton, at a birth:

*The miracle of birth is always there, I think, after every birth. But the first baby, the first delivery, is always special because of it being the first. You've never had a child before that is part of you and part of your husband (65).*

The uniqueness of a *Plautdietsch* story is probably lost in the translation, but we are treated to some delightful vignettes here.

*In Her Own Voice* documents tremendous social changes in the lives of Mennonite women. Many have been nurtured by the teachings of the church. But the destructive backwash of some Mennonite teachings is also evident. There are women whose stories reveal that they have been deeply hurt by the church. Anna Fullerton describes, for example, how her father was excommunicated and how this affected her whole family.

These social changes included the health care afforded to women. Apparently, attitudes toward the birth process and breast feeding have radically shifted toward the rightness and naturalness of the process (91). Particularly in the fifties, sixties and seventies, birthing was treated as an illness by some health professionals, according to those interviewed. In some instances the voices heard here are an indictment of the medical profession. The reader senses, underlying many of the interviews, a feeling of helplessness and sometimes anger at the insensitivity of care givers.

Younger women are blessed by increased knowledge of their physicality. We sense from the interviews with younger women a refusal to knuckle under to churchly abuse of power and to domineering health professionals.

All of the women, however, profoundly changed by the wonder and the uncertainty of the birth process, express their joy at the happy outcome: a unique, living human being.



*S*isterhood is both personal and political.  
If it is to be a model for love  
in the twenty-first century,  
we must learn how to turn  
our dross into gold,  
our difficult stories  
into grist for our daughters' mills.  
If we don't tell our truths,  
how will they set us free?

*Marianne Ewert Worcester*