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“Ich Bin So Froh” (I am so Joyful)

JEAN JANZEN

The day our family entered the United States from Canada, all the flags were out. It was June 14, 1939, my sister’s fourteenth birthday, and my father teased her that the stars and stripes were in honor of her special day. We were traveling in two cars with drivers from the church in Mountain Lake, Minnesota, who had hired my father to be their new pastor. Nine of us in a heavy rainstorm that turned the gravel roads into mud, brown water splashing against the car windows, as though nature was testing our decision to immigrate.

At the age of forty five my father was switching vocations from country school teacher to become pastor of a Mennonite church. His joy in teaching the Bible as lay leader in the Saskatchewan church led to his decision; he also was weary of teaching eight grades in one room for over twenty years. In addition, he and my mother were seeking high school education closer to home for their three oldest children, not as available in the Dalmeny area.

In Saskatchewan we had lived in the teacherage on the school yard out in the country. Now we were becoming small-town dwellers in this undulating, green landscape, the streets shaded by maples, a park with a bandstand at the center surrounded by neatly kept stores. We claimed Mountain Lake without reservation. My oldest brother found a country school teaching position, and the fifty dollars a month salary from the church was padded with gifts of a cow, chickens, a smoked ham, and seeds for the garden. Three brothers and my oldest sister entered a flourishing public high school, complete with excellent choirs and a band, and my younger sister and I were students in Bible School, which once was called German School for its effort to preserve the mother tongue. In the church we were surrounded with kindness, new friendships, and familiar Mennonite ways of singing and learning.

I began kindergarten in the parochial school, a year filled with sensory images—much singing, an indoor sandbox, and the noise and enthusiasm of post-high school Bible students playing ping pong in that same basement space. Outside we played fox-and-goose in the snow and pumped our legs on the swings until we

almost reached heaven. We heard Bible stories illustrated on blackboards with colored chalk. Here I learned both the English and German alphabets, and here I wrote my first poems in grade four, encouraged by Miss Rieger, then bound the five little poems with yarn from my mother's knitting basket. We presented our voices in memorized pieces and songs in elaborate programs. In one of the Christmas programs little Samuel began reciting the poem "Ich bin so froh," (I am so joyful) with quavering voice, then broke into sobs. The loving Miss Rieger carried his trembling body off-stage as we all began to sing "Joy to the World." This event became a source of laughter at our family supper table, but I sensed its true meaning only later in life.

Our family move became more dramatic when our newly adopted country entered the war. After months of anxiety, my three older brothers, being draft age, received deferments because they were ministerial students. Blackouts, rationing, and battle reports from the radio clouded our household. Adding terror to my life were revivalists who came to our city to call sinners forward in this time of danger. While my father distrusted some of the ways of these evangelists, most of the town seemed to be mesmerized by the drama and skill of these preachers, whose music staff would introduce such songs as "Blackout for Jesus" while the local Buller twins hammered away at the marimba.

Soon after he began pastoring, my father became aware that he needed more training, and so he began a weekly commute to Minneapolis for Bible courses. He would take the bus on Monday and return on Thursday, full of enthusiasm for his professors and studies. After his arrival from the bus depot, too late for our family supper, mother fried eggs and potatoes for him, and I would stand beside him as he ate, listening to his summaries and his joy, smelling the romance of cigarette smoke on his clothes and hair. Somehow the worldliness and sacred writings combined into something adventurous and wonderful, even as it was a confusion of what was forbidden and what was holy.

My father's passion for learning moved us in 1945 to Kansas where he joined two of his children at Tabor College to gain his own bachelor's degree. This displacement just before sixth grade was jarring—a new public school, new friends, and a house full of college men where my parents were in charge. Twelve, going

on thirteen, I was thrust into a “family” of college men who pounded up and down the stairs and had late-night escapades unheard of in our household. On this college campus I was exposed to the beauty of choral singing in the stained glass chapel, a taste of faith and the arts coming together, and witnessed the apparent joy of intellectual discussion as my father shared ideas and concerns with my siblings and fellow students.

Sometimes at supper he, overwhelmed by his required courses, would sigh and confess that he might not pass genetics. I worried with him and for my sister struggling with new friends and geometry, and my little brother needing home schooling after breaking a leg on the school playground. In this town I wrestled with the invitation to sing the lead role in “Hansel and Gretel.” A sixth grader, my parents allowed me to decide, and my piety won out. This was too much like the forbidden theater; I would be a brave soldier for Jesus and give it up. Even now I ache a little when I hear Humperdinck’s heavenly duet “When at night I go to sleep, fourteen angels watch do keep,” either for the beauty of it, or, who knows, the lost chance of a stage career.

On weekends my parents took us three younger ones with them to a house church in a town about twenty miles away where ten or fifteen people gathered to be taught the “true” Mennonite faith. Here I took catechism from my father. With his gentle teaching, I assented to the Gospel without reservation, willing to “accept Jesus as my personal savior and to follow him,” yet I was terrified that I might be killed in a car crash on the narrow country roads on our way home at night. My baptism was arranged in special circumstances—we were moving back to Minnesota, where our church performed the ritual by pouring water over the head. The Mennonite Brethren required total immersion, and chances were that at Tabor College one day I might meet an M.B. to marry. Therefore, my father arranged for my minister-brother to immerse me in very cold water in front of several witnesses. Sometimes I still gasp in the memory of that “political” decision. Properly drenched, I entered eighth grade back among my Minnesota friends.

The experiment with school administration was not satisfying to my father. After three years he returned to pastoring, moving us yet again from the Minnesota home, this time to western Kansas, where I completed my high school education.

In the Academy he became my Bible teacher, the role in which, in retrospect, he seemed most at ease. In this flat countryside I was also educated by dust, wind, and gorgeous sunsets, and by my father's shining face as he came out of his study to tell my mother about a new discovery.

Did my father's love of learning influence my own movement into poetry? Surely the songs, hymns, and poems of childhood, and the memorizing of passages in the King James Bible were leaning me toward love of language. When I brought home report cards with straight A's, he would chuckle and stutter out the A-A-A's. What I wanted was his praise. When I won awards in school, my mother, instead of expressing her pleasure, would warn me "not to get proud." Yearning for approval, was I learning lessons for the long journey of life and writing, that joy waited in the process itself, that praise and knowledge are not bliss?

And what is joy? Anthony Esolen in "A Manna for All Seasons" defines it as the Sabbath being present in the midst of labor. He describes a visit with his cousins in Italy who take the day off work to tramp through the woods with him to gather mushrooms for dinner. Like the gathering of manna, he writes. "We might say of joy itself, 'What is this thing?' because if we can work for it, it isn't."

Surely for me the "stabs of joy" have been granted in my marriage, in such events and gifts as the birth of our children, the restoration of friendship, and the assurance of being loved in a myriad of ways. Making an unexpected discovery in the process of writing has been a source of joy. Yet it is a state which cannot be sustained, so well-stated by William Blake: "He who binds to himself a joy/Does the winged life destroy/But he who kisses the joy as if flies/Lives in eternity's sunrise."

At our wedding (I did marry an M.B.) the pianist played "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring," the confession that not even our marriage partner can offer ultimate bliss. We didn't know at the time the meaning of Johann Schor's text set to music by Bach. The English translation is not true to the original German, lifting Jesus into a more lofty, abstract being, while the original carries an intimacy and a kind of vow: "Jesus shall remain my joy, my heart's comfort, carrying all sorrow. He is my eyes' delight and sun, my soul's darling."

My father's devotion to my mother, and hers to him, was exemplary. He openly

showed affection for her in our home, holding her on his lap and caressing her in our presence, what I rarely witnessed in the homes of others. They sustained each other in his quest for learning and vocation, and major decisions were accompanied by the words, “We have found the joy to do this.”

Being the child of a pastor, however, was an education like no other. If I had left the church, it would have been over the poor treatment he at times received from his parishioners. The lack of skill and grace in lay leadership is a painful memory. He agonized mostly silently, or with my mother, who was his solace, although he honored me during my late high school and college years with some confidential complaints. But he also expressed gratitude when his parishioners showed evidence of growth and learning.

In his last days my father was torn between wanting to go home to God, or home to his Anna. I arrived in his last hours when he was in a coma and restless, almost as if he had some learning left to do. I caressed him to soothe him, reciting the Twenty-third Psalm. I wanted him to recognize and acknowledge me, but this was a journey he would take without me or my mother.

His peaceful, final breaths were monumental and holy, and at his funeral service we sang joyful hymns of gratitude through our tears.