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Peace House … 'A Place to Belong'

SSP Spirit and Conscience, March 2002

BY ELAINE KLAASSEN

Getting acquainted

A lone building stands across the alley from the Dairy Queen in the wasted land at the corner of Portland and Franklin in the Phillips neighborhood. Peace House, as this solitary oasis is called, has been around since October of 1985—long before the corner was empty. From its name I always imagined it was a kind of McGruff House for adults, a safe place to go in a dangerous part of town. A few weeks ago I found out that's exactly what it is.

Some of the most defenseless and vulnerable adults in the city find refuge at Peace House. Most of the people who are part of the Peace House community live at subsistence level, with incomes far below the $37,000-per-year-for-a-family-of-four that is usually considered low-income. The people who come here feel safe and protected. Many get strength and hope to carry on. Peace House is a vibrant community where anyone who enters will be respected and encouraged.

Open from 10 a.m. until 3 p.m., Monday through Friday, Peace House welcomes about 60 people per day. For the first hour people without homes come to get stuff from their lockers, clean up and change clothes, pick up phone calls and have a cup of coffee before going to work or to do errands. At 11:30 the doors are locked for meditation and lunch.

A number of ethnic origins and religions and non-religions are represented; ages range from toddlers to octogenarians. Many people involved in the Peace House community are unemployable or hard to employ because of mental health problems, prison records or chronic chemical dependency, disease, disabilities and dysfunctions. Wounded veterans and members of Veterans for Peace find their way to Peace House. Sometimes people who work in the neighborhood or students from colleges and high schools come to visit. People who participate are not identified or defined by their income, or lack of it; they are valued for their own singular experiences and their need for peace and spiritual companionship.

It was a brisk, hazy afternoon the first time I visited. Outside, a woman named Marge explained that "this is a community," and told me to go in and make myself at home while she finished her smoke. She told me right away I should come for meditation the next day.

The room was packed. A few people were sleeping, many wore their hats and coats. A little boy and a woman were carrying a toy train around the room playing "going to California."

A big, bright sign painted on the opposite wall said "Welcome to Peace House." Underneath it were various signs expressing ideals for Peace House, all created by community consensus: Sharing responsibilities, Genuine concern of each other, Be yourself/No labels, Respecting other's views, Laughter and sadness, Disagreeing but staying connected ... And some specific rules: If you use foul language or you are verbally disruptive you will be asked to leave.

Marge is a fun-loving volunteer who started coming to Peace House almost from the beginning with her friend Catherine. They're both from a Catholic church in Golden Valley.

A guy sitting close by was holding a canister of cookies. The woman next to him wanted the cookies next, but for some reason he wouldn't give them to her. The little fight, or teasing, or whatever it was, went on for about a minute. Then Marge just took the cookies and passed them on. She has a lot of authority. She calls everyone, with total sincerity, "sweetheart" and "honey."

I started talking to people. Michael was sitting next to me. He belongs to the Nation of Islam and is from Kansas City. He said he likes to sleep a lot but also likes to cook, mostly soups and stews. His friend Derrick, who is also Muslim, joined us. He likes to read poetry and English literature and especially loves watching TV. But he said watching TV doesn't help him know what is going on in Afghanistan. "I'm not the President," he complained. He's probably right that only the President really knows.

Volunteer Walter Nelson has been homeless for a long time. His dad was a police officer and became a witness whose knowledge was dangerous to the family so the family was moved to Chicago through a witness protection program. Then the family separated and his mother was beaten by her boyfriend and died of pneumonia in the hospital. He grew up and married and had three children who are now grown. Two of his nephews have died violently in Minneapolis in the last decade, one shot by the police and one shot in a gang battle. In 1987, Walter was left for dead in a hit and run accident. He spent 13 weeks in a coma, developed gangrene and nearly lost his leg. The prognosis was that he would always be in a wheelchair, but he learned to walk again. He is left with somewhat debilitating memory lapses and a chemical imbalance from a demerol drip. A criminal record resulting from "my own bad choices" makes it hard to find employment; however, he finds plenty of volunteer work. He said he should have a PhD in public relations—helping people. He volunteers at Peace House, St. Stephens and Catholic Charities Branch III. Lately, for the next month, he has a gig in the kitchen at St. Stephens.

Shortly before closing, Harry, who is blind, and his wife, Shirley, brought in day-old goods they collected from Super America and Lunds. They come almost every day. I found out that my friend Joan collects leftovers at Whole Foods once a week and brings them over. There are others who do the same.

Noon at Peace House

The next day, I got there in time for meditation and lunch. A young man introduced himself to me as an activist and an MI (mentally ill) individual. He spends a lot of his time at Peace House and at Spectrum House, an agency that helped him find housing where he can pay a fraction of his disability check.

To open the gathering, we went around the room and introduced ourselves. One guy said he was Felix and then, to be silly, another guy said he was Felix, too. One guy said his name was Gandhi to appreciative smiles. Some kids from St. Olaf College and from Cretin Durham High School were there.

The discussion revolved around affordable housing. Why can't old buildings be renovated? Why are they torn down? Where will the federal housing money go this year? A plan to invite the new mayor to visit Peace House was proposed and several people volunteered to work on the invitation. (As we went to press the mayor canceled a scheduled visit, but some are hopeful he'll have time at a later date.)

After a portion of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech was read, someone commented that Arizona and Texas are the only states that don't celebrate Martin Luther King's birthday. Janet, the facilitator, opened the meditation with the question, "What are our dreams?"

When race came into the conversation she emphasized that there is no scientific basis for four, five or six races—or "six and Hispanic," which made everyone laugh. "You need to know that," she went on, "we all have red blood and breathe the same air."

A man who wanted to remain anonymous asked, "Would it make a difference if there was a scientific difference?"

Somebody asked, "What do you have against scientists?"

“Scientists don’t believe in God,” he answered.

Someone else offered, “God IS a scientist.”

Somebody talked about the woman who was mayor of Chicago who went to live in the difficult projects—Cabrini Green—and opened up houses for people to live in.

After the discussion there were prayers: for someone who was in labor right at that moment, for the stress in one person’s living situation, for someone’s nephew-in-law who was having a back operation, for anyone who would sleep outside that night—the forecast was for five below.

Steve, the sous chef, served lunch. The food is cooked and brought in daily by the volunteer coordinators. Of course, anyone in the room is welcome to wash dishes, and the dishes always get done.

During the meal, Stevie, who suffers from schizophrenia and is obviously well-loved by the group, told me, “I’m a genius except I’m slow.” He told me he had originated the motto for Peace House that’s on their calling card, “A Place to Belong.”

After lunch I talked with Sally, who had stayed at Marie Sandvik’s off and on for many years. She’s thankful for the seven weeks she has been able to live in Mary Hall in St. Paul where she has her own room with a lock and key and her own refrigerator and pantry. She shares a kitchen and bath. Although theoretically she could stay at Mary Hall for up to 10 years, she hopes in two years she can live in a regular apartment. Several hurdles stand in the way, though: She has an unlawful detainer on her record and she struggles with certain dysfunctions. She wants to learn to cook but can’t go to school “until she is more grounded.” This month her monthly SSI money went to ordering pizzas, so now she’s short on food. She knows it was “unwise.”

Regino has lived in Minnesota for six years. In fall he had a roofing accident, after three days on the job, in which his spinal column was separated. He still hasn’t been paid for those three days and the guy in charge is out of town until April. Regino and his wife don’t live together anymore, he said, because he hit his children. His frustration at not being able to control his daughters, whose behavior he believes is not OK, was apparent. His sadness, for a person of such an obviously happy temperament, and his confusion at American culture and his respect for his wife were moving. The support of a church community didn’t seem like an option for him. He said everyone was too insincere. He likes Peace House and goes there often.

While we were talking, Stevie read me a poem he had just written.

Rebecca is a 22-year-old welfare-to-work mom who is temporarily out of work because of a clavicle injury. Luckily she’s been able to hold on to her apartment, and the daycare where she works is holding her job for her until she’s better. Her little boy runs around Peace House and plays with everyone. He’s been part of the community since he was 2 days old.

I felt I was meeting heroic people. They are still standing. They have hope. They laugh. A man who called himself Ed said he came to Minneapolis from Chicago for a job quite a few years ago. But then he busted his knee cap, couldn’t work and plunged into a downward spiral. His life was radically changed. Now he’s been homeless for a long time and lives outside. He said the first thing that goes are your feet. It’s impossible to keep them dry and warm. It’s hard to get the right shoes. He suffers from depression. Yet, he said that he prefers being outside to being inside. One day in meditation, the leader asked people to talk about their talents—Ed and a buddy said they were “really talented at surviving.”

I realized again how easily a person can enter into a life of abject poverty when struck with an accident or a debilitating disease, especially if they have no family support. The memorial shelf with pictures and memory-mementos of Peace House community people who have died over the years attests to the toll that poverty takes.

The Peace House story
I couldn't interview the founder of Peace House, Rose Tillemans, by telephone because she had an earache; the vibrations of a voice on the phone were too painful for her. The program coordinator at Peace House, Gail Hayden, who has adopted Tillemans as her spiritual mentor, said Rose's earache is the result of hearing so many painful stories for so many years.

Later when Rose was better, we talked in person. While we were talking, she received a phone call, but she wouldn't take it. She said she will never drop one person for another. She gives her full attention to the matter at hand.

Rose Tillemans is a 79-year-old nun who belongs to the socially conscious Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet. She left her ministry as a classroom teacher in 1974 to join another sister, Rita Steinhagen, at the Free Store, which Steinhagen founded in 1969. During the 10 years Tillemans worked at the Free Store she came to believe that people living on a subsistence level needed spiritual support once some of their basic needs were met. At the free store she was overwhelmed with the chaos. "There was no place to sit down and just talk and listen." It became her dream to create a place where people living in the most debilitating levels of poverty could gather with dignity to share with other people their lives, their wisdom and their struggles.

She raised $3,000 from friends, family and backers whom she petitioned personally. In her search for rental property, she came across the current building on Franklin Avenue. The owner, John Bacich, was rehabbing the building and, enthusiastic about her project, offered her the low rent of $500 per month. In 15 years he never raised the rent and in 1999 decided the rent payments had paid for the building and put it in Peace House's name. Tillemans said he was proud of what his building had become.

The early days of Peace House were difficult. Once Tillemans signed the lease, the neighborhood and the City Council gave her a hard time. People were afraid that this "agency" was one too many. What the lady at the Dairy Queen said would happen apparently never did: "Your customers will come and clobber my customers." When Tillemans described, in a Phillips neighborhood meeting, what she was trying to do at Peace House, "they almost booed."

And not many people took advantage of the sanctuary that Peace House was offering. The concept was perhaps too strange. No one really knew what it was for. After 13 days the Star Tribune sent a reporter who interviewed Tillemans for an hour and a half, slept through meditation, left for awhile and returned later. Only two women had visited all day. The reporter asked, "How many people came in today?" Today Tillemans laughs at how much she wanted people to show up. "Counting the ones who went out to smoke and came back in, there were about 14 who 'came through the door.' "

Tillemans lost heart and called Bacich asking to be released from her lease. But he encouraged her, "Look what Jesus suffered," to which Tillemans replied, "Yeah, and look what happened to him."

But in the end she didn't give up. She did, however, realize she had to put out coffee and doughnuts. That really helped.

The vision for Peace House was and still is a place for equals, not a place where the haves give handouts to the have-nots. Rose didn't want to "reach a hand down." She wanted a place with no hierarchy—a

gathering for people no matter what their walk of life. When it is necessary to ask someone to leave, it is not done by the "authorities" but rather by peers.

Meditation time creates a platform for people whose voices are disregarded. Tillemans said, "The best way to change society is to listen to voices—it's the affirmation of each person's voice." She went on, "People here are very bright—they've had tough bounces."

To sum up her philosophy, Tillemans said thoughtfully, "I look benevolently on the people I encounter and do not have expectations that they will think like I do. I don't teach or proselytize. The Church has done a number on poor people and there is no proselytizing allowed [at Peace House]. People have a right to hang on to what is meaningful to them. [We have to] let go of shame-based religion and religions that claim they alone have truth."

Tillemans is tiny, tough and funny. Her humor cracks through, like a chick hatching. She led the meditation one of the days I was there and I was struck again, as I was earlier in our conversation, by the kindness in her voice. She called everyone to quietness and to "remember the beautiful person that you are. Forget the names you've been called," and then added with a chuckle, "I was thinking of myself on that one." A young man across the room looked like his face was literally bathed in the gentleness of her words, like a plant soaking up sunshine.

Peace House functions on a yearly budget of $56,000 donated by churches and individuals. A year ago Gail Hayden got a grant to come on board as program coordinator. She's a tall, lovely blond with to-die-for skin who walks with a cane and lives with lupus, a genetic auto-immune disease. She's a former banker who raised five children as a single mother. When she got involved at Peace House, the "meaningless conversations about vacations and 'where did I go to school?' and 'what do I do for a living?' which were 'driving me quietly out of my mind' disappeared." Her colorful, dramatic vintage clothing (she keeps things forever) and genteel manner coupled with a feisty, passionate spirit endear her to the community. She does what she can to steer people to helpful resources for housing, chemical dependency treatment, health care, you name it.

Time and again she is moved by the generosity of people at Peace House. Many have given her amulets or other good luck objects to protect her from the lupus that attacks her body. Others, "with nothing but the clothes on their back give one layer to someone else or they give half their food not knowing if there's a meal ahead, giving because they recognized a need and honored it."

The Peace House dilemma

The future of Peace House is up in the air. According to Hayden, it all started the day after Christmas in the year 2000 when the Central Community Housing Trust (CCHT) offered to buy the Peace House building. Peace House was shocked and said no, they weren't for sale. Then they learned about the Portland Gateway project—a collaboration of CCHT, a respected nonprofit affordable housing developer; Hope Community, a nonprofit housing and community organization with a long history of service in the Phillips neighborhood; and Franklin Avenue Development (FAD), a for-profit corporation that is no longer a member of the collaboration. Peace House representatives realized the development would be good for the neighborhood and didn't want to stand in the way.

A written offer from Hope Community in spring of 2001 was rejected for being too vague. Another offer came from FAD in August, but Peace House's temporary pro bono commercial real estate attorney, Kathy Hayden (no relation to Gail), said she saw too many red flags. She said that a reasonable offer would have to put Peace House "in the same position they're in now."

All negotiations between Peace House and the Portland Gateway Collaborative have ended

inconclusively. Deanna Foster, director of Hope Community, told me they are very intent upon creating a win-win solution. She said there would "unequivocally" be space for Peace House in the development. Meanwhile, Peace House is waiting for a reasonable offer in writing.

Peace House has established that it needs, at least, 1,600 square feet, maybe 2,000; four parking spaces; relocation costs; zoning approval from the city; three unisex bathrooms; a kitchen with a triple sink; handicapped accessibility; and a location within six blocks of where they are now. The list has been given to Alan Arthur, director of CCHT, and he is confident that an agreement will be reached. He understands that Peace House "feels like a hammer is hanging over its head and if a solution isn't reached today, the hammer might hit them tomorrow." His goal is to "keep talking" and when an agreeable solution is reached, "Peace House will be better off than it is now." He said a new offer will be presented to them in early March.

The people who make up the Peace House board of directors—Tillemans, Hayden and various longtime volunteer coordinators—are not deliberately holding up the development. They are simply looking out for their people and trying to preserve a strong neighborhood entity—which operates a respectable block club; was wholeheartedly accepted by the late Brian Coyle, after his initial reluctance; is considered a "cousin" to Hope Community, according to Hope's director; and, recently, receives the support of City Council Member Dean Zimmerman, of the 6th Ward.

Peace House is a beautiful community where people accept each other and, strange as it may seem, laugh together a lot—there is gallows humor, bawdy humor, intellectual and sophisticated humor, silliness and, last but not least, Tillemans' droll wit. Who would want to lose this special and unparalleled place?

Meditation Liberates

SSP Spirit and Conscience, February 2005
BY ELAINE KLAASSEN

Meditation in prison

We step into a grand entrance hall. Shiny large letters high up over the first set of iron gates say "Stillwater MCF." Shiny woodwork and smooth stone panels delineate the soaring walls. Tiny white and green hexagonal tiles cover the floor of the enormous entry and stretch into the visitor waiting room.

Cal Appleby and his partner, Laurie Savran, have been here many times. Cal taught college classes here for 33 years during the end of which time he and Laurie started coming as volunteer meditation leaders. Like all volunteers to correctional institutions, they've completed the one-day certification/orientation required each year for each institution they enter. In other words, those who visit 10 institutions regularly, which Cal, Laurie and many others do, spend 10 days a year getting certified. (Because I am certified for another facility in a different program I was cleared to visit Stillwater just for one day.)

The guards are neither friendly nor unfriendly. We walk through the security monitor door frame and no sirens go off. Cal shows his brass meditation bell and the cushion and cloth on which it rests. Not a problem. Then we go through a series of clanking metal gates whose bars reach to the distant ceiling. The last gate, which walls off the chapel area, is made of large steel concentric circles welded to a square frame that swings shut behind us. When people refer to "being inside," that's exactly what it is. Really inside.

Eight men join us in a small, plain, rectangular room. Half of us sit on the blue floor cushions provided by the Buddhist Peace Fellowship and the other half sit on chairs. The three of us from the outside tell how we barely got there because of the snow. Cal's car, which had died in the middle of an intersection, was now at the shop being fixed. To get me on the road, my daughter and her friends generously pushed my car down a very long unplowed alley. Buddha-like calm had enveloped us as we got ourselves to Stillwater, we said. Well, almost.

Everyone agrees at the beginning that it is OK for me to use their words and change their names in this article.

A man who takes his place at the front, clearly a leader, is the editor of the prison newspaper and a gifted painter. Two of his large, haunting watercolors, tributes to the courage shown at Ground Zero 9/11, hang outside the chapel. He asks about Patrice, a volunteer who is usually there for these regular Saturday afternoon meetings.

Another man, Brent, says Patrice is in Myanmar on a meditation retreat—for six weeks—out of communication with the rest of the world—even her husband. "Patrice has a lot of guts," John, the painter/editor, says. "She's a tiny little woman, with a big heart."

Cal opens the meeting with an invitation to introduce ourselves and say how our [meditation] practice is going, or, if we don't have a [meditation] practice, what it is that interests us about meditation. Most people give their names. Not everyone speaks. The meeting is organized Quaker-style so that anyone can speak at any time, i.e., you don't go around the circle.

A number of people respond that meditation helps them deal with the noise in prison, after trying the obvious solution—earplugs. The meditation meeting at least takes them away from the noise for an hour and a half. Brent says, "There's a big roar in there."

Tom says the noise makes it hard to concentrate. Meditation helps him think through his studies, a theology correspondence course. It helps him calm down, relax, wash the day away, and then his ideas flow on paper better.

Alex says he shakes a lot and suffers from ADHD. "When I leave here my head is empty and I can concentrate a little more."

Willard says the meditation techniques help him cope with stress in the environment. Now he can step back and analyze a situation. Now he's not easily provoked. Tom adds that meditation gives him the extra [mental] space he needs so he doesn't care if somebody gets the last word. He can now walk away from situations that formerly would have ended in fisticuffs.

Brent says he needs meditation when he starts getting negative. Tom says that meditation opens him to good thoughts.

After our initial acquaintance with one another, it's time for a meditation. Cal says to focus on the feeling of your breath, not the idea of breathing. Meditation is the foundation of mindfulness and trains your attention. "It strengthens your attention muscle." He says to close your eyes if that's necessary to block out distractions, otherwise keep them half open and unfocused. It's important to notice what you're dwelling on as thoughts enter your awareness, but equally important to gently let them go.

He taps the brass bowl/bell three times, an exquisitely pleasing sound, and for 15 minutes we sit in silence, a short, wide disk of red candle flickering in the middle on the carpet. We do this twice during the entire meeting.

After each meditation we share our experience. Everyone acknowledges what an amazingly difficult task it is to empty your mind. Nevertheless, guilt about not being able to do it is definitely not the goal. There are lighthearted comments from Alex and Laurie about seeing images of spaghetti and long hair. Willard and Brent speak as though they've awakened from beautiful dreams. They describe a jade green Buddha bathed in light and a day on the lake waiting for the fish to bite.

Accepting things the way they are is one of the tasks of meditation. If you have 500 thoughts, then you have 500 thoughts. If you don't do what you're trying to do, then you don't. It's not an occasion for judgment, but rather for reflection. Meditation isn't something you do to see if you will succeed or fail. To encourage everyone, a young man who spent three years as a Buddhist monk and is now finding his way back to meditation says that if he has two breaths [during the 15 minutes] that are black, that is, free of thought, he has met his goal.

Laurie sees the stretch of time in meditation as a chance to make decisions, either to keep the thought or let it go. "It's your choice what you want to do with your time."

Corey, who has been practicing meditation for years, remarks that today his thoughts turned to impermanence, which he has been working on lately. "The tsunami," he says, "demonstrates that things are not ever the same one second after the next." Grasping on to things and not accepting the impermanence of all things is the cause of suffering. "Of course," he says, "when things are not going well, impermanence is a consolation. When things are going well, one doesn't want to accept it."

The constant in our conversation is the idea of living in the present. Now is the only time you have. It's all there is.

The Volunteers

Around 1997, Cal began to assemble a network of volunteers to bring meditation to prisons, treatment centers, retirement complexes and homes for mentally challenged and disabled people. He called it the Beverly White Outreach Project, named for his teacher, a yoga instructor at Macalester College, a lifelong student of meditation, a poet, author, community activist, lecturer on comparative religion and a friend to many people.

The organization is nonsectarian. Its 30 volunteers include a Zen priest, practicing Buddhists from sanghas throughout the Twin Cities, including Common Ground in the Seward Neighborhood, and one "in-church-every-Sunday" Episcopalian. People from other traditions, such as Tibetan Buddhist or Christian centering prayer, are very welcome. Also welcome are former prisoners who've begun the meditation journey.

Volunteers go to Stillwater twice a month, Oak Park Heights once a month and St. Cloud once a month. They also go to Lino Lakes, Rush City, Shakopee, Sandstone, Redwing and the Prairie Correctional Facility, a private, for-profit prison. The department of the prison that helps to set up meditation groups varies. Sometimes it is the psychology department, sometimes the chaplain, the nurse or the volunteer coordinator.

A recipient of the 2003 Virginia McKnight Binger Award in Human Service, Cal is the understated mastermind and driving spirit behind the Beverly White Outreach Project. He hopes that the meditation groups, wherever they may be, will foster more meditation groups.

The practice of meditation (and yoga) in his own life is fundamental. Many years ago it helped him overcome alcohol addiction. It is the strength and grounding of his educational philosophy. He is devoted to growth, and describes himself as a lifelong learner. The knowledge of "oneness of all things" and the ability to "let go of the outcome" or to simply "observe what is going on" has allowed his creativity to soar. One of his favorite themes is "learning through difficulty." In his characteristic way of turning a thing on its head, he claims, "Our best teachers are difficult people, computers, health crises and so on." As a college teacher, in prisons (until the funding for higher education in correctional institutions dwindled) and at Augsburg College, Cal consistently brought diverse groups together to look through each other's eyes. In prisons, he got staff, guards and prisoners to take classes together, all for credit. He taught criminology classes in prisons in which prisoners were able to correct and update the textbooks. He used role plays to help people figure out what it's like to be someone else.

Because he knows personally what meditation will do for one, he reflects that it especially benefits those who are incarcerated because the self-awareness practice "allows them to have more choice, more ability to respond. They become less mechanical and conditioned."

At the same time, there's so much to be gained by volunteering. Cal says, "I've never met one volunteer who didn't say spontaneously, 'I get more out of it than they do.' "

What Laurie gets out of going to meditation groups in prisons is that "people share in a more real way than people on the outside. They are really serious about [meditation] practice. It's more profound than any other group."

Seward resident Dave Brus, who is part of the Seward Common Ground Meditation Center, has been a volunteer with the Beverly White Outreach Project for three years. A practicing Buddhist for 16 years, he

reflects that meditation practice lets us experience "the more sublime, the essence." Prisoners "express amazing wisdom and deep insight—in spite of poor choices they may have made." Dave says people in general don't always make the correlation between wisdom and action. He likes the meditation groups because they are sort of like support groups, not just for inmates, but for volunteers as well. He also enjoys the way each session has an "organic nature to it. Check-in starts a theme and it's fascinating to watch the flow. It's very moving."

Besides benefiting himself, Dave reiterates Cal's belief in the benefits of meditation for prisoners, although, when he says " … it's a way to look at life in a new way … It offers a chance to let go of negative thoughts of self and go to feelings of a deeper nature," he could be talking about himself as well as about the groups. Dave talks about the interconnectedness of all people. He says, "We think we're seeing the other, but we're seeing ourselves. We think we're so different, but we're the convict, the poor person, the rich person, etc."

A Leap Forward

In the film "What the Bleep Do We Know?" a clergyman, or maybe a scientist, describes how thousands of people met to meditate in Washington, D.C., during the summer when the murder rate was at an all time high. As in other cities where massive meditation had also been organized, the murder rate dropped 25%. What will happen in the former Burma where Patrice is meditating?

There really is a powerful place, a place where the divine spirit lives, that is beyond our own egos, physical forms and personal histories. The place where the spirit lives is in all of us and it's all the same spirit, the same light. We are all one. When thousands of people meditate, the awareness of the collective spirit becomes overwhelmingly powerful. This all makes sense to me.

I've been reading Eckhart Tolle to prepare for this story. His ideas are not Buddhist ideas per se but they are related to Eastern philosophy. I've come across ideas like: "Live in the present, not the past or future; be completely present at all times; don't make up stories, see what is there; don't judge or put labels on everything, let it be; surrender to and accept the present; live in a state of consciousness, not thought; observe, don't label; surrender and acceptance are not the same as resignation; form and essence are not the same thing; we are all one." Not all of what I read made sense, but whenever something rang a bell, it was an exquisitely pleasing bell.

What I've learned so far has been liberating. You don't have to be literally incarcerated to need liberation.

Anishinaabe man crafts unique spiritual path

SSP Spirit and Conscience, March 2008
BY ELAINE KLAASSEN

In 1986, Nick Boswell walked into a used-book store and picked up an old copy of the Koran. He thought, "Oh, here's something to give my brother to reform him." Once he started reading, though, he knew the message was for him. It astounded him, hit the nail on the head, made perfect sense to him. He couldn't stop reading. A new world opened to him and he started doing research on Islam, which convinced him further that he was on the right path.
Then he looked around for a mosque and discovered there was one in Columbia Heights. On July 4 of the same year, he walked up there from South Minneapolis. He thought he'd just sit in the back and watch, but he wasn't allowed to do that. He had to participate in the prayers. "I went every day for a year," he said, "and then they invited me to be on the Board of Directors."

Boswell's Islamic faith is now central to his identity.

Boswell is, as he calls himself, an "Ojibwa warrior from the sovereign state of the White Earth Indian Reservation located within the confines of northern Minnesota." He was taken away from his family when he was small and placed in a boarding school for three and a half years. He said it was "harsh but fair," like the 21 years he spent in the military, first in Korea and much later in Vietnam, where he was disabled.

Upon his return to the United States, he got involved in the Franklin Avenue Social Service Committee as well as with the Native American community. He formed a group called St.Paul/Minneapolis Coalition of Chippewa Heirs. During that time he had two children and earned degrees in sociology and chemical dependency counseling.

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Boswell was easy to spot when he arrived at Maria's Restaurant a few weeks ago. He's a big man in good shape, whose signature black beret, displaying a Combat Infantry Badge, covers his long, gray ponytail and frames his broad, affable face. His right hand and leg are noticeably crippled from his war injury. He said he barely hears out of his right ear. He ordered eggs and potatoes, no meat, because Maria's doesn't serve halal meat. At home, he said, he eats meat because he can buy halal—or kosher.

There are many qualities in Islam that appeal to Boswell. Two stand out.

As a "spiritually disillusioned warrior" he was glad to become part of a religion that champions oppressed people and has a true sense of justice. He saw the way the U.S. military treated the Korean people, "like animals," and then the Vietnamese people the same way, and realized it was exactly the way Native Americans were treated in this country.

In the 1980s he joined with other Native Americans to fight to save land on the White Earth Reservation. "Vernon Bellecourt [of the American Indian Movement] told me, 'Senator Boschwitz is taking our land,' " Boswell said.

Boschwitz introduced a bill in the senate that "legalized all past illegal land transaction on White Earth Reservation," Boswell wrote in the Islamic Center of Minnesota's newsletter. He continued, "The Ojibwa Indians have been historically treated as foreigners on our own soil, we have yet to be shown the respect of human rights and self-determination."

Boswell compares the Native American fight for Indian land to the fight of the Palestinians who continue to lose their land and their dignity. “With Allah’s guidance, we will prevail, as our Palestinian Brothers and Sisters across the ocean will,” he also wrote in the Islamic Center newsletter.

“What about the suicide bombers?” was the question that couldn’t be avoided. The suicide bombers, he said, are willing to give their lives. They choose to give their lives. In Palestine they have to because they can’t compete with jet bombers and tanks. “All they have left is their bodies.”

The other quality of Islam that speaks to Boswell is the strictness, the discipline. He said following the rules makes it possible to have happiness. When people don’t steal from each other (personally or institutionally), when people focus on God and the well-being of the community rather than on their own selfish spheres, when there is no chemical abuse (chemical abuse is impossible where tobacco, alcohol and other drugs are strictly prohibited), people can live together in happiness.

The prohibition against alcohol is very important to Boswell. He quit drinking in 1975 and since then one of his goals in life is to find out what causes alcoholism. It was a scourge upon his own life and is a scourge upon the Native American community. He would like to find a solution.
His dream is to create an Islamic school for Native children where they can live and be surrounded by adults who are not using drugs or alcohol. To prepare for his school, Boswell pursued Islamic studies in Egypt, from 1991 to 1994, and would like to do further Islamic studies.

In the late ’90s he was invited to study again in the Middle East but couldn’t leave his high school-age children. He would still like to consider it if he could get through all the red tape and get around the present political state of affairs.

After his children graduated from high school, he went to Springfield, Ill., where he earned a master’s degrees in human service counseling: alcohol and substance, gerontology, children and family, social service administration. In 2005, he studied at the Adler Graduate School in Hopkins. Why Adler? “I found the answer to my concern about alcohol in Adlerian psychology. The first five years are formative years. If parents are drinking in front of their children … In the Islamic lifestyle there is no drinking in front of the children.”

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Boswell is a person of vast experience with all kinds of human beings. He has touched down in many cultures. He is curious about people, likes meeting people and has a broad range of friends and acquaintances, whom he clearly enjoys. When he was a social worker, he was involved above and beyond the call of duty; people would call him in the middle of the night with their problems. He’s entrenched in people.

Our conversation took many turns. He offered many personal, and sometimes incongruent, takes on things. His sensitivity to the miniscule and odd forms of prejudice that erupt among people is finely honed.

Boswell sees no conflict between Native spirituality and Islam. He is proud to call himself Ojibwa, Chippewa, or Anishinabe, whichever name you want to use, and his origins are deeply respected by his Muslim brothers and sisters.

The Ojibwa believe in the spirits in mountains, streams, rocks and air. “We have ceremonies that call on the spirits. Islam says that God made spirits and mankind to worship him,” he explained. “It’s different in Christianity and Buddhism.”

Almsgiving, one of the five pillars of Islam (profession of faith, prayer, almsgiving, the fast and the pilgrimage to Mecca) came up. Almsgiving is the fountain of hospitality, which Boswell says Islam and Native American spirituality also have in common. “Muslims practice hospitality, like Natives do on the reservation. If someone’s hungry you have an obligation. And then people show their gratefulness by chopping wood, for example.” However, he said, almsgiving and hospitality of necessity have to be curtailed when there are drugs and alcohol involved. “Drug use affects the ability to be hospitable.”

What about hospitality between Sunni and Shia Muslims? Everyone wants to know about the conflict between them. Are they like the Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland? Boswell clarified that there are many pacifist Muslims and, obviously, among the Muslim pacifists there is no violence. (Boswell himself is not a pacifist. “I admire them,” he said, “but I’m an infantry man. I couldn’t do that.”) Also there are many Sunni/ Shia marriages unaffected by the flames of prejudice encouraged by outside forces.

He didn’t explain the violence but he did explain the difference between Sunni and Shia. Shias believe the Koran says the caliphs should be descendants of Muhammad and Sunnis believe the caliphs don’t have to be descendants of Muhammad. In its practical application, the difference is a class difference, each group with its own practices and traditions. In the U.S., as in the rest of the world, the majority of the globe’s approximately 1.3 billion Muslims are Sunni, but violence between the two groups doesn’t happen here in the U.S. as it does elsewhere, he said. My impression was that he sees violence and warfare across the planet as inexplicable, but inevitable.

Boswell says what he sees, and he sees a lot, which makes him hard to describe. You start to call him an idealist, but then you have to call him a realist. He is knowledgeable and grounded in his unique faith journey. He seems happy.

Building a family: what it takes

SSP Spirit and Conscience, December 2001

BY ELAINE KLAASSEN

To become a parent is to take a giant step into the great unknown. Parenting is spelunking and bungee jumping all rolled into one. It takes a lot of bravery. And you have to be so open.
In giving birth one is literally and physically stretched to the limit. Adopting a child stretches one to another kind of limit.

The degree of effort required, both to give birth and to adopt a child, seals your commitment. And in both cases, the degree of risk is comparable. You can't really control the outcome. You parent as well as you can. You go where you never thought you could go. It's the mystery of love.

For example, your child might love animals so much that you end up sharing your house with a 16-foot python. (I know somebody like this.) The poetry of your child's faith might inspire you to remold your own. Your child might bring home friends (and their parents) so strange, weird and different that you think you've landed on Jupiter. Or, your child could lead you halfway around the world to the Ural Mountains where Bashkir nomads used to roam.

Louis Hoffman and his wife, Rebecca Howes Hoffman, a couple of lawyers well-established in their professions, were married in 1988 and took their time starting a family. Finally, when Louis was 37 and Rebecca 41, Benjamin Edward was born on June 20, 1995. Strollers and diapers became as much a part of their life as dossiers and briefs.

Louis, satisfied to have grown up as an only child, leaned toward raising a family with one child in it. At the same time, both he and Rebecca thought it would be wonderful for Ben to have a sibling. Adoption entered into the conversation partly because giving birth at 44 or 45 seemed risky and partly because they thought it would be good to give a home to a child who didn't have one. The idea was up in the air until one day an International Adoption Agency ad in the Star Tribune popped out at them: Orphans from Russia were available for adoption. Louis' grandparents were Russian Jews who had left the Ukraine at the turn of the century so he felt a definite connection to that heritage. As a Russian studies major who had been to Russia in 1974, Rebecca also felt a kinship with their future child.

However, "It wasn't like God spoke and said, 'Do This.' " There was still a period of time in which they asked themselves whether adoption would be good for their family and whether they could swing it financially. Helping themselves to support from friends, family and their church community of St. James on the Parkway Episcopal, they at last arrived at "an inner conviction that everything will work out" and they moved ahead. Wherever children come from, building a family is always a "leap of faith," said Rebecca.

They went to the adoption agency website and picked out photos of three children and then requested their medical information and videos of them. Rebecca couldn't exactly describe the unpleasant feeling of picking children. Maybe it was too much like ordering at a restaurant or picking out a puppy at the humane society. Maybe it was about picking one and not the other, knowing that you can't take them all; there are more than a half a million orphans in the former Soviet Union, about 1% of which are adopted each year by Americans.

Radik Nicholas, who eventually became their son, was one of the three. All the Hoffmans know about his ancestry is that his mother was Bashkir, a formerly nomadic Turkish tribe of whom there remain about 1.4 million members.

Fortunately, there is an International Adoption Clinic at the U of M—part of the Pediatrics Department—that provides the expertise necessary to interpret the medical records. According to the records for Radik, he had seven horrible sounding diagnoses and would be a vegetable. But, interpreted at the clinic, they meant that Radik was delayed, as is normal for kids living in orphanages, but wouldn't have permanent problems.

The Hoffmans filled out the paperwork at Christmas in 1999. About 10 months later—approximately the length of gestation, as Louis said—they had another child. It was an intense and emotional 10 months.

After handing in the paper work in March of 2000, Rebecca and Louis were checked out thoroughly by every imaginable method to satisfy the International Adoption Agency. Their finances were scrutinized. Through the INS, the FBI studied their fingerprints. They were investigated by the Bureau of Criminal Apprehension, the Minneapolis Police Criminal Records Department, the Department of Human Services, and Hennepin County Child Protection. They had to be tested for HIV, which involves several tests over a period of six months. Embarrassed, they kept explaining every time they went in to the clinic, "It's for adoption."

In August, the Hoffman's were notified that, within five days—for the first of the two trips to Russia required by Russian law—they needed to be in Magnitigorsk, where they would meet little Radik. Since they were on their way to New Hampshire to visit Rebecca's family anyway, they just continued on, flying to Amsterdam, to Moscow, to the regional capital, and then catching a van to Magnitogorsk, which straddles the Ural River about 300 miles southeast of Moscow not far from the border with Kazakhstan. The whole trip took three days.

They were told to bring cash to pay their driver, interpreter, representative of the adoption agency and so on, all of whom were extremely well paid, earning more in one day than the average Russian earns in a month.

The van trip was a colorful event over bad roads through dry, empty land dotted with old wooden houses and their matching wooden fences. The entourage, which included two other couples—from Florida and Pennsylvania—spent the hours on the road deep in philosophical conversation about the nature of friendship while drinking Russian cognac—and pondering the official U.S.-versus-Russia animosity of yesteryear while searching in vain for rest areas.

The purpose of the first trip was for the adoptive parents to give a definite yes or no about taking the child they had chosen. When Rebecca and Louis met Radik for the first time, the child immediately put his arms around Louis and wouldn't let go. Rebecca described Radik as a "silent, sweet child who clung to us. Very lovable." There was no decision to be made. Just like when you give birth to a child, "Do you want to keep him?" would be a very stupid question.

Despite the obvious impossibility of each child in the orphanage receiving adequate personal attention, the children were physically well cared for. Louis mentioned several times the regimentation of meal time. All the meals were pretty similar. At dinner, there was fruit juice, a vegetable soup and a plate of soft meat or fish with some kind of starch and a little baguette. It was prepared so that a two-year-old could eat everything by himself with a spoon. The child would break the bread in half and use one half to sop up the soup and the other half for the entree. The children always ate on schedule and cleaned their plates. Louis says one of the "advantages" of Radik's new higher standard of living is that he now knows he can pick and choose what he wants to eat.

In an almost symbolic first ice cream, Louis and Rebecca took Radik to a Baskin Robbins—next door to a

BMW show room, several of many signs of Westernization in this 20th century steel town on the border between Asia and Europe.

Between the extreme summer heat without air conditioning; 12-story buildings with unreliable elevators; the bureaucracy (chocolates convinced one inspector that Minneapolis and Edina, both given as the address of the adoption agency, were the same city); grueling journeys; and a helpless feeling, the adoption went through.

Dealing with the bureaucracy in an unfamiliar culture was very difficult. Rebecca said, “It was a tough experience. Like giving birth, you just have to let go. Like many people, we’re control freaks. You have to let go and trust these people even though it’s against your every instinct.” It seemed impossible to get any questions answered. “You ended up answering your own questions.”

On Louis and Rebecca’s second visit to Russia, in November, they had a court hearing. Louis said, “It was especially hard, as lawyers, to deal with the bureaucracy of a foreign legal system. Our own lack of control was emphasized to me as I looked around at the Russian tri-color and the double headed eagle, symbols of the sovereignty of a foreign nation.”

Radik was issued a passport—stamped with a hammer and sickle—and given permanent resident alien status to enter the United States. In February of 2001 he became a U.S. citizen.

At first, when they returned to Minneapolis, Rebecca spoke Russian words to Radik to comfort him, to make him feel more familiar. Now he speaks English like any other 3 ½ -year-old American kid.

Rebecca and Louis want both of their kids to be familiar with the Russian connection and are involved with a cultural organization called Families for Russian and Ukrainian Adoption (FRUA). At the same time, they have to allow Radik to decide, eventually, how much he wants to take on a Russian identity. He may be really interested. He may want to read Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Turgenyev, Pushkin, Chekhov, Gorky, Boris Pasternak—maybe even in Russian. (Considering Louis’ love for history and gift for storytelling, both boys may be drawn to Russian culture.) He may want to collect matryoshka (what we know as nesting dolls). He may not. He may just want to be American. His parents believe they will have to support his inclination.

Right now the brothers are two regular kids without a care in the world. They bounce off the walls trying to impress a strange visitor (myself). They play ducks and sharks and riding on the train—invented games with the kind of esoteric rules that only children understand. And they’re proud of their dog.

Looking for the silver lining in a cloud of frailty

SSP Spirit and Conscience, September 2003

BY ELAINE KLAASSEN

At first glance she appears to be watching TV. Her face is pointed in the direction of the television, but upon closer observation it is apparent she is simply staring at the screen. This is my mother's first full day in a 24-hour care facility. She sits in her tiny room surrounded by some of the lovely, masterful quilted works she was once able to make with ease. On the metal closet doors, held up by charming magnets, there are plenty of family photos. All of us, her children, made sure we were represented; none of us wanted to be left out.

I brought some thread, needles and piles of quilting materials from her drawers at home, but she said she gets mixed up on the stitches. I told her to try sewing on different days because some days would be better than others—the mental confusion would come and go. She suffers from what used to be called hardening of the arteries, the same condition her mother succumbed to at a much earlier age.

I brought her dictionary in case she might still like to do crossword puzzles. And I brought her Bible because it was next to the dictionary. She pointed to the Bible and said, "I don't read that much." I said, "Maybe you should," trying to be funny.

My friend Rhoda said that upon moving to the nursing home, residents go downhill. Later they adjust a little, they rally and become more alert. I can't imagine my mother's shock as she realizes this is to be her last earthly stomping grounds, with no old friends (her old friends are just as immobile as she is), and the creeping awareness that she must now make new friends, as much as possible. Will she come to terms with the inevitable—not death, but loneliness? Will she adjust to that?

My mother isn't entirely sure she has left her apartment for good. She mentions what she will do when she returns to her home—her absolute and immaculate domain. It is the place where the memories of her life as a registered nurse, small business owner, artist, wife and mother are stored. It is where she used to entertain with Martha Stewart-like perfection; where there is a place for everything and everything in its place; where there is evidence she might be the secret author of "Hints from Heloise"; where there are lazy Susans in every cupboard; where there is no clutter; and where every appliance, gadget and apparatus is functional, including the perfectly maintained, sturdy ironing board with tightly fitting cover—a wedding present in 1940 from my dad's two bachelor farmer brothers.

For the first six days of our visit, before we moved her into the nursing home, my daughter and I stayed at my mother's apartment while she stayed in the hospital. In a last flurry of "real life" we brought her to the apartment every day and cooked up a storm. I had always known there would come a time when she wouldn't cook for us when we came to visit, and this was it. I knew she was truly failing when she didn't even try to tell me what to do. At the same time, she was absolutely clear about where she kept every little thing, and she remembered the exact proportions for pie dough and pie filling.

The energy I put into bringing clothes to her in the hospital, helping her dress, pushing the wheelchair, helping her from wheelchair to car, and from car to wheelchair, folding the wheelchair, stuffing it into the backseat, folding the walker and resting it in the trunk, plus food shopping and cooking made me feel incredibly useful. I don't know when I've felt so useful—maybe when I had little children scurrying around my knees.

We didn't do much at her place. She napped quite a bit and tried to read a little. One day we played rummy tile and although she sometimes put the numbers upside down, she still beat me.

On one of those days, my aunt came over and we tried to find out what my mother wanted to take to her room in the nursing home. We also tried to determine which items were valued objects with family history that shouldn't be shoveled into an estate sale. But we didn't get too far. It all seemed abstract to her, and maybe not too important.

We had talked earlier, when my brothers and sister were there, about which furniture and pictures she wanted to take with her to the home and then, of what was left, who wanted what. Since I live the farthest away, I had to take my things now instead of waiting until her apartment is sold.

When my father died, in 1990, my mother discovered he had left a piece of sheet music on his piano, "This World Is Not My Home." Maybe my mother now resonates with that sentiment. But I still feel very much tied to this earth and the things of the earth and therefore felt that I was plundering her home. There were gaping empty spots on the walls where I removed the photo portraits of my children as toddlers; a complete miniature tea set given to me for Christmas when I was 8, displayed in a special shelf designed and built by my father; one of my mother's wall hangings called "The Mariner's Compass"; a painting of a little girl talking to a bird in a tree, a gift to my mother from her parents when she was a little girl (when I was growing up I always thought the girl lived in an underground kingdom); and some plates from Granada, Spain.

Remaining were two large paintings of the farms of my two sets of grandparents, which, thankfully, my brothers will take. The painter was Betty, a good friend of both my parents and myself, who died suddenly seven weeks after my father's sudden death. We learned to know her years after she lost the use of her arms, paralyzed from polio in her early 20s. She painted wistfully, with longing and great love for this world, by holding the paintbrush in her teeth.

Betty dealt with her handicap in a courageous way. In general she took charge of the essentials and let go of the inessentials—she had the power to effect change in other people's lives by caring about them. The more helpless you are, the more you are called upon to take charge, to give something irreplaceable. For example, at the First Church of God where I play piano half the time, the great-grandmother of the church is very, very old. It takes her a half hour to get from the car to the sanctuary (with a lot of help from her son and others), she's hard of hearing and she sleeps blissfully through the sermons. I always give her a hug and she always says, "God bless you, darlin'," an irreplaceable blessing I look forward to and which, I believe, gives me strength.

Just before our trip to Kansas, I went to see Betty's daughter and was deeply struck by another of Betty's paintings. I had seen it before but it hadn't really registered like it did now. Betty's darkest hours of helplessness, loneliness and vulnerability informed the image of a forlorn, broken kitchen chair standing discarded in a farm field. I know there were many times when she felt like she was something you would throw away.

Nevertheless she believed, most of the time, that life was valuable in all its forms, even when it appeared to be worthless.

Now I'm hoping and praying that my mother's caregivers have reverence for life in all its forms, even when it appears to have no more value than a broken chair.

My mother's gradual downward spiral began with a mysterious one-car accident a few years ago. She was driving on the freeway one minute and the next second she woke up in the ditch with no knowledge of

what had happened. The investigating officer asked her if she'd been drinking, which gave everyone in the family a good laugh. (She may have had a sip of wine once many years ago.) Then the next spring, for no apparent reason, she fell and broke her hip. The hip healed without incident but she was having unusual drops in blood pressure that made it dangerous for her to walk around unattended. She became weaker but still managed to live alone.
Then came the gravest problem of all. A ligament in her foot burst. It just cracked. She said it sounded like the porcelain of the shower floor breaking. From there she developed hammer toes, had surgery, got orthopedic shoes and little toe supports. The foot is painful and doesn't serve to support her. Between the damaged foot and the fluctuating blood pressure which has caused other falls, walking is a major problem. She gave up her car last fall. Now she gets around in her wheelchair if there is someone to push her, or shuffles with her walker, perhaps across the room.

The natural isolation that occurs when a person becomes immobile is unimaginable. As long as one can walk and drive, one can go out to where the people are. One can seek company when the fancy strikes. A mobile person can choose to be alone or not be alone. This lack of choice is an immediate imprisonment.

At my mother's apartment I found four longhand notes she had taped to her door at different times asking visitors to pop their head in the door, call out their names and wait for her to get to the door, to please not go away. The notes did not read like desperate pleas, but at the same time they indicated a strong fear that people would just knock and, finding no one home, would leave.

The impotent position of waiting for visitors can be understood by prisoners, infants, animals at the humane society, or mental patients. That's why Jesus told his followers to visit those who are in prison as an expression of compassion for those with various forms of immobility.

I admire my friend Jan for her dedication to the elderly members of her family. She lives in downtown Minneapolis and drives to a facility in Bloomington (a southern suburb) every other day to visit her very aged aunt, and goes to St. Cloud, an hour's drive, every other week to see her 91-year-old father, who still lives at home.

One morning before I got to the hospital, my mother's pastor had dropped in. She was delighted that he sang a song for her. She said he has a beautiful voice and was surprised he was cheerful enough to sing considering that he is being fired by his congregation, apparently because he is "strange and weird." (The rumor in the small town is that he has been so labeled because he kisses his wife in public too much.) If he visits my mother, and furthermore sings beautifully, he's OK in my book. And, as far as I'm concerned, he can kiss his wife in public all he wants if it's OK with her.

My mother's situation made me grateful for my own mobility. When she would say, "Could you get me my hearing aid box?" or, "I need a toothpick ... There's one in that drawer," I was happy to jump up and get it because I was reminded of how easy it is for me to walk four steps—without pain, without losing my balance, without forgetting why I'm walking over there and without putting on my orthopedic shoes first.

Illness and weakness were frowned upon in my family of origin, and even more unacceptable were complaints about illness, weakness or pain. So, I see my mother not complaining, as is to be expected, and I wonder if she thinks less of herself for being weak and debilitated. Is she ashamed of needing help?

I also wonder if she worries about her past sins, real or imagined—does she have any of those? Is she afraid people will be mean to her now that she is helpless? My friend Joan says, half-jokingly, "I try to be nice to people because I never know when I'll be helpless in a wheelchair."

During my visit with my mother, she said various times, “I’m getting good at doing nothing.” At first I thought she was just giving up on life. But then I thought, maybe she’s letting go of certain things and making room for others. She’s been reading “I’m Still Dancing,” a book by a nun I know in Minneapolis who just died, Sister Rose Tillemans, (Sister Rose is alive in Kansas!!!) and tells me often how much she loves it. Maybe her willingness to do nothing is evidence she’s moving into a more meditative state. It’s certain that she’s in failing health, but maybe not everything that appears to be evidence of it actually is. Maybe when she’s sitting there doing nothing she’s just sitting there with God, as people do who practice centering prayer.

Painting with the camera: JoAnn Verburg at MoMA

Pulse, May 17, 2006
BY ELAINE KLAASSEN

We are all angry at our mortality. We don't like it that our life has a set length to it, AND we don't like it that we can only be our own selves. One of our big challenges in life is to get away from seeing everything through, or with, our own eyes only. The mark of a great artist—of any medium—is the ability to give us a heretofore unknown experience. The work of art gives us the chance to truly escape the confines of our own defining egos, and helps us cross the border to where we've never been—almost as someone else. When I read "Les Miserables" it changed what I was aware of. I saw architecture, homes, public buildings, streets and parks completely differently. I saw the meaning of design and its relation to society. I went around for weeks describing everything I saw in Victor Hugo language, as though Victor Hugo was seeing it, not me.

There's a photographer in St. Paul, JoAnn Verburg, who was chosen last fall to have a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. She's in New York working on it right now. It is scheduled for July 10 to Oct. 8 of 2007. Holy MoMA! She's in good company: Henri Matisse, Jasper Johns, Jackson Pollock (as well as the sculptor Lee Bontecou, the painter Elizabeth Murray and the photographer Lee Friedlander, to name a few.) Verburg's work will be seen in the center of the art world! But that's not why I like her. It's because she lent me her eyes—like Victor Hugo did.

When I learned about the retrospective, I asked her if I could write about her for Pulse. She gave me a generously long interview and later, one afternoon, set up a mini show for me in her studio. After I left, I was in a state of heightened consciousness. I've always said that if the world was ending tomorrow I'd go outside and look at the light. Yet, much as I pay attention to light and its colors, I was seeing light as I hadn't seen it before—technically, poetically, spiritually, sensorially. I kept seeing colors and textures and accents and hues everywhere I turned. I felt high and oddly happy.

Verburg told me that "in the beginning [in her work] everything was about the sun." Now, her newest work is a series of portraits all in shadow, relying on the inner light of the subjects.

Verburg keeps on making pictures. Just because she's having a show at the MoMA doesn't mean she's going to take a break and have parties. I mean, sure, she has parties but she doesn't stop working. The day I went to look at her photos, she and her husband, the poet Jim Moore, were having a dinner for "vegetarian friends who don't (but should) know each other," and she was also hanging up a new photo fresh out of the dark room that was going to her April show in Seattle, *Poet Under Water.*

Jim insisted on sweeping instead of vacuuming because I was there to look at photos. He knew the photos would give me a different feeling if I saw them accompanied by the sound of a vacuum cleaner.

Verburg's work is very technical and very spiritual. Those two abilities are not in conflict, it's not a paradox. It's a beautiful balance.

"Missing Children," one of Verburg's smaller works, is shiny and attractive. On a glassy table top there are grapefruits, an apple, a gleaming yellow ceramic plate, wilting red flowers in a plastic ribbed glass, flat white pottery cereal bowls, a thick, old-fashioned barrel-shaped glass, an orange coffee press, and a transparent container of orange juice. They surround a milk carton with pictures of MISSING CHILDREN. Milk and crumbs pool in the bottom of the bowls; dregs of orange juice nestle in the glass; and there's a little coffee left over in the French press. I'm sitting at the table. Breakfast is over. The children are still missing.

Verburg calls the theme "the kitchen table, a metaphor for the most personal, intimate, relaxed and vulnerable place a person might find themselves. It's a place of openness." The photos from these simple day-to-day places are injected with some kind of printed news from the outside world—unpleasant, undesirable, terrifying. Unsettling words and images reach someone "in a dream state." She says, "One's politics are determined in moments of privacy, not when someone's yelling polemics. What seems so disparate and separate are a lyrical, beautiful moment and a horrible decision you have to make that is political. They're not such separate things—these pieces have to do with putting a lyrical, private moment together with difficulty—the political, public difficult side of life … both aren't in different worlds, they are different aspects of the same world."

I can feel the sublime repose of the couple "Martha and Doug," from a series of black and white photographs made in the early '80s. Half-submerged in a swimming pool, I can feel the weight of the water and the weight of their bodies. Martha rests her face on Doug's strong back, her wet hair wet slicked back, a tiny smile pulling on the corner of her mouth. The water line and splashes of water on their bodies are sharply delineated. Water is the medium for their physical and psychological meeting. The water holds them up so they don't have to hold each other up. Water is their bond and their balance.

In the hallway outside Verburg's studio hangs a framed shot of a sand pyramid. It was the original pyramid that Verburg happened to see on a beach that led to her recent pyramid series. Since then, artist friends have made various pyramids for her, and she has photographed them in different lights and from varying angles. In one of them, called "Untitled (White Pyramid)," the scarcely perceptible changes of shades in the all-white image dazzle me. I love its sense of mystery. Visually, there's nothing that tells you what the pyramid is made of, where it is, how big it is. It could be in Egypt or in your basement, it could be 2 inches or 200 inches high, it could be made of sand or sugar or clay. Underneath lies the question: "What does a photo really tell you?" Verburg says, "I like the ambiguity." The possibility of religious significance is definitely there; the luminosity made me think of the monolith in Stanley Kubrick's film "2001." It goes without saying that the pyramids are about something more than three-dimensional triangles. "As an artist you don't know what you're doing—you find out later," says Verburg.

In a certain way, the photos of trees, some of which are enormous, are as abstract as the pyramids. Verburg and her husband have been going to Italy for 22 years and have a deep connection to an area outside of Rome, where the trees were photographed. When Verburg showed her sacred oak and olive tree series at the MIA a few years ago, her "catalogue" was a poster of one of the works with commentary on the back, in both English and Italian. While an important aspect of the photos is the fact that they represent a Mediterranean landscape, and some of them the ancient olive industry itself, my strongest response was purely aesthetic. They are so sensual, so composed, so created. Some of them look like they contain hidden pictures, some look like they're in 3-D. It gives me immense joy to involve my sense of sight in this way.

The presence of the artist's hand is so strong. There are sharply silhouetted unripe olives, branches forming shapes like letters of a language, sunlight reflecting bright orange off a gnarled branch, hidden ruts of a path among the trees, wishbone trunks growing in clay, textured areas that resemble paintings by Cezanne or Monet. Verburg goes after a contrast between sharp and soft. She uses drawings to plan the compositions, spends hours with a tripod finding the right distance. She has equipment that allows her to texture certain areas of the photo, stretch things to fit. It is apparent that not only is the produced result sensual, but the process of making it is sensual as well.

Besides Verburg's framed photos, she has created trademark installations in which she developed film directly to glass. These large, unique works are all in the Twin Cities—one at the Mill City Museum, two

at the U of M and five at LRT stations, from Lake Street to 28th Avenue. “I created it [the technique] for my purposes. If someone in another part of the world also created it, that’s their business. I had a need and created a solution. I work intuitively, and in the case of public art works, I had an idea, a vision, of what I wanted that was forming as I talked with the commissioning people, the people in the neighborhood, other committees, and looked at the site …” One of the sites at the U of M is Appleby Hall. It’s a glass ceiling with its own obvious metaphor. Verburg says, “It’s a good physical way to enter the educational experience, stretched, open and looking up. In the general college … there are all kinds of people—you could be almost in any part of the world. There are nine panels, representing all continents.” She made collages of her photos of skies and tree branches from China, Tibet, Europe.

Her photos of trees on glass can be seen at the LRT stations, part of the effort the city has made “to create an environment we want to be in, that we like.” She makes a strong case for beautifying our civic ambient. “If public art is done in a spirit of trying to be sensitive to where it is, it can be an inspiring addition to the lives of thousands of people who experience it every day … Strangers come in and get an impact, positive or negative of Minnesota, of Minneapolis, and want to come back—or tell other people to come. So, those things aren’t measurable in some really simple way that ends up two plus two equals four. “

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All the artists (and scholars) I know want only one thing: the means to continue doing what they’re doing. They only want fame and riches to the extent that those things enable them to keep engaging with the materials. What happens when you’re given a retrospective show at the MoMA? Does it make you rich and famous overnight, so you can keep making art for the rest of your life? Verburg is about to find out. When I ask her why she got this show she says she doesn’t know. “MoMA does exhibitions. The roulette wheel was spun … There are a lot of very capable artists out there who qualified. I don’t think I got picked because I’m the only one who’s the right person to show. The curator likes my work. The department chair likes my work. I’m not trying to be overly modest. There are numerous talented people. I feel very lucky and grateful that my work will have an audience at that place in that way.”

She doesn’t have a bibliography, a biography or a resume, so I can’t look up where all her work is. She doesn’t know either. The Minneapolis Art Institute, the MoMA and many private collectors have bought her work.

The curator of the retrospective, Susan Kismaric, began selecting fromVerburg’s enormous body of work at the beginning of this year. Verburg comments that the show will be “heavily edited … it will give my work a cohesion that I would not.”

This week Verburg is helping Kismaric make the final selections, whittling the initial group of 150 works to 75. They are going through the creative process of deciding where photos will be placed, how they will be grouped, where the walls will be. Kismaric will put together notes about the artist and the significance of her serene, sensual and cerebral work to the larger sweep of art history.

On the phone from New York I ask Verburg about the definition of “retrospective,” and she says she doesn’t really know. The definition doesn’t interest her too much. “It suggests you have to be dead,” she thinks. Or maybe other artists perceive it as “not a fresh young voice.” In any case, she says it seems Kismaric isn’t exactly thinking of the show as a retrospective now. Verburg has no idea what the title of the show will be. She doesn’t care. Of course she’d rather have a “snappy” title (than not).

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I ask Verburg, why photography? It has to do with her idea of time. “I love the way photography ARTICULATES time.” When she makes an image of a tree or a face or a pyramid, she is not “capturing”

a moment. She's not "stopping time." For her, photography is about MULTIPLYING time, bringing the present time of the viewer together with the present time of the photographed image—the present time of the photographed image, of course, being in your imagination. "I don't want you not to feel like you're in your own body in a gallery or in a room. I want that fictional experience of the olive orchard to be there in addition. I guess that's what I mean when I say you're doubling time." She concludes, "You're in your own time but you're also in your imagination in a way that it doesn't feel like two different things. My current fascination—has been for quite awhile now—is the viewer's time in combination with the implied time of the photo—how the two things come together.

"I used to go to a museum in Boston. There was a Vermeer painting there—which was later stolen. I was doing photos at the time using a similar quality of time as the painting "The Music Lesson." You see the back of a person at the keyboard. As the viewer, you are sitting in the back of the room, listening, but also waiting. The quality of looking at the painting felt very parallel to what it would be like to sit in a room waiting and listening. That quality of the viewer's time being related to the kind of time you could spend looking at photographs was hugely influential."

When Verburg talks, she paws her words, turns them over and bats them around, conscientiously rather than playfully, as though owing the thought her deepest effort.

Verburg's father had a job in industrial photography and there was always camera equipment in the house. Once at a baseball game, her father offered to introduce her to a famous photographer and she decided to ask him what she needed to do to become a photographer. He told her three things, but she remembers only one: "Always draw." That was easy; she always had a pencil, pen or crayon in her hand.

"Do you draw?" she asks me suddenly. I say that I used to quite a bit. "Then you know that when you draw something you see it differently." Yes, that is true.

Her first photo influences were Life magazine and family slide shows. As a child she half paid attention to Life "bringing in the world." Her photos are somewhere between what Life [magazine] was doing and art, she says. Photojournalism isn't "true" in the sense most people would call it true, she comments. It's "true in a subjective sense."

In college she discovered the work of Robert Frank, the Swiss-born Jewish photographer who collaborated with Jack Kerouac, and made a book called "The Americans," in which he looked at America from the outside, with detachment and irony. "When I saw his work I thought photography could be art. It was a different way of looking at the medium," Verburg remarks.
When I picture Verburg's photos in my mind, and talk about them to myself, I unintentionally call them paintings. That's how they seem, although they are obviously photos.

Comparing painting and photography she says the first corresponds to fiction, the latter to nonfiction. "In painting, drawing and sculpture, there's no implication of truth as there is in photography."

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Verburg, who is pretty without makeup, small and trim, grew up in New Jersey, and came to Minneapolis to teach at MCAD in 1981. Before that, the launching pad for her career was a job she had with Polaroid, in the days when computers were really huge and so were instant-photo cameras. The machine was a "behemoth, on wheelchair wheels, weighed 300 pounds, could only make vertical pictures, and anything made outside turned out to be too contrasting." The pictures were 20 by 24 inches, or more. Verburg's assignment was to put together a visiting artist program for the Polaroid corporation—"to figure out who was working in the art world whose work was appropriate to work with that new medium … painters as well as photographers."

After three years, Verburg was exhausted, working all the time, and didn't have a life. A visiting artist position opened up at MCAD and she got it. Suddenly, only teaching three and one-half days a week, she felt like she was retired and finally had time to do her own work, pursue her passion.

Two years later she got a Bush Fellowship. She met her husband at a meeting for outgoing Bush fellows, of whom he was one, and for incoming fellows. "He said some wise things, which I heard with great interest," she recalls. "He also made very good coffee."

From the beginning of her career Verburg has done enough serious work to be taken seriously. As an articulate visual artist, she gives gallery talks and lectures. She honors her own work and her words. I can see how much when I ask, "How strongly do you feel about people getting it?" and she responds, emotionally, "Well, they're not going to get what I got, ever. But I'd like for people to get something … I don't know. How would I even measure that? How would I even want that? I don't even know quite what the language is … I don't mean literally but I mean how I would approach that question because I don't know what another person's life is like and what another person would get out of a work …" In other words, she has no interest in telling you what to feel or think; she's not making propaganda and she's not manipulating you.

Verburg's father was a scientist-turned-businessman. He was "inquisitive, curious, fun and loving." Her mother was very "intense, socially active and concerned about poor and disadvantaged people. It was great how different they were—two extremes." Her parents' interests and character come together in Verburg's work. She was the girl scientist/techie and at the same time very interested in people. Her college degree was in sociology.

Verburg considers herself lucky to have had the parents she did, a demonstratively loving grandmother, a safe neighborhood, material well-being and great friends. She grew up with a lot of support, which gave her the privilege of being able to take risks. "Not being afraid is such a privilege," she exclaims.

The intense discipline apparent in Verburg's work is also part of her life philosophy. "All of us constantly face the abyss, but I don't feel that rules out joy … Even in the worst of times I believe in joy—it's almost like a philosophy, and that to, ah, yeah, here's something I wrote down maybe 20 years ago. Isaac Dinesen talked about 'the courage to be happy.' I thought that was just the right word. It's a choice. There's a lot of suffering in the world … I do believe it's important to stay in touch with happiness, being balanced personally. My pictures are trying to find balance in a world out of balance."

Verburg's Minneapolis show opens Thursday, May 25, 6 – 10 p.m., at the Gallery Co in the Wyman Building, 400 1st Ave. N., Suite 710, Downtown. It will run through July 22. 612-332-5252.

Meditation on disappointment

Southside Pride and Pulse, August 2007
BY ELAINE KLAASSEN

What do you do with enormous disappointment? What do you do when you just couldn't have something you really, really wanted. I don't know.

Rarely do I take big leaps—mostly to avoid disappointment, I suppose. But this time, since "I'm not getting any younger, and I may never have such an opportunity again," I made the decision, which I'm really proud of, to do something crazy and completely outside the realm of my normal, sensible life style. And look what happened. The whole thing fell in a heap at my feet.

I was taking the advice of Mark Twain: "Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover." That was exactly what I intended to do. It was expensive, it took a lot of effort, but I was up for the challenge. I felt so daring.

I don't even know how to think about this. The year had already brought two huge disappointments—the death of Pulse of the Twin Cities and finding the orange ring around my last backyard elm tree. Now this, my truncated overnight trip to New York City, seems even worse than the other two.

Why was it so important to get to New York City on the night of July 10, 2007? It's because I was personally invited to attend the opening of a show at the Museum of Modern Art. JoAnn Verburg, a wonderful photographer who lives and works in the Twin Cities and has done some important public art pieces here, was selected, in 2006, to have a show at the MoMA, and last spring I got to write a cover story about this consummate artist for Pulse of the Twin Cities. When it came time for the opening, she graciously sent me an invitation.

"Can I really go to NYC for one day?" I asked myself. Any artist person would understand why I wanted to go. How often do you get to go to an opening of a show at such a venerable institution as the MoMA? I felt honored, of course, but more than that, as curious as all get out.

If I just wanted to see the show, I could have planned to go on any weekend. That in itself would have satisfied my basic curiosity about what the show looked like, the geography of it, and how it felt, with JoAnn's enormous, gorgeous photos displayed in enormous rooms—I love her photography, the largeness of it, her technical skill, her painter's eye.

But my curiosity extended beyond just seeing the show—I was curious about the opening, itself. It was kind of like getting an invitation to Buckingham Palace, a chance to observe and interact with royalty. See how the other half lives. What would that be like? I'm such a campesina. How would people dress? What kind of folks would be there? I was interested in the whole question of elitism in art. How elite of an event would it be? How was JoAnn going to feel? Would she feel used by them, a means to an end? How crass, or how pure, would the whole thing be? I wanted to see how comfortable or uncomfortable I would feel at such an event.

I love art. I don't mean just visual art. I mean all art. It feeds my soul. I can't live without it. And I don't believe anyone can, whatever a person might say to the contrary. We experience and perceive the world through our senses, from which all art is built. And we long to perceive and experience more than is possible for just one solo human. So, our souls need art.

I totally do not understand the whole world of art dealing and how it is possible that certain paintings can be "worth" millions of dollars. It is very exciting that there exists a group of people who arrive at a consensus about what is valuable and what isn't. So maybe that's all the money thing is about—the amount of money a painting is "worth" really means the degree to which it is approved by a whole bunch of people who really look at art down to its last detail and care about it deeply. Obviously, living artists need to be paid for their work so they can continue to make art. What I don't get is paying millions for art by dead artists. Well, no, I changed my mind. I guess I do. It's a way to control its whereabouts—so it doesn't get thrown in the trash. It's hard to imagine what would happen to great works if nobody stepped up and said, "I'll give you $3 million for that so you don't throw it away." But why wouldn't $100,000, or $10,000, do just as well?

I have to say I am rarely moved by art that displays no rigor, no craft. Works have to show a deep knowledge in order to convey something new. Great art transports me beyond the confines of my own perceptions. In a place like the MoMA, art energy converges into a critical mass. I wanted to be there.

My daughter convinced me we should bite the bullet, spend the money, make the huge effort that travel requires, and just do it. So we bought a package online, flying with a major well-known airline and staying in a highly-recommended two-star hotel in Queens.

We thought that leaving at noon from Minneapolis gave us plenty of time to get to the MoMA by 9 p.m. Wrong. Even when our flight didn't leave until 1 p.m., I still thought there was plenty of time. Even when our flight got to Chicago much later than expected, I still thought there was time. Even when they told us our continuing flight to LaGuardia had been canceled, I thought there was plenty of time. Only when we started calling the re-booking phone number, and they started telling us there were no flights available, did I start to believe it might be the nightmare that it eventually became. There were some ups and downs in between, though. We passed through brief moments of hope.

A sympathetic woman at the re-booking counter found us a flight on United that was supposed to leave at 4:55 p.m. We thanked her profusely and walked the 15 minutes to Terminal 1, where we read on the board that our flight had been postponed to 5:45. Well, we could still make it, we thought. Then the torrential rains began. Our flight was postponed again, and then again. No one said exactly why there were no flights. It was probably the weather, but I couldn't really believe that.

On TV in the airport we saw a report about this guy who traveled by lawn chair and helium balloons. He attached the balloons to his lawn chair and floated through the air. It was clear that getting to New York by lawn chair was as likely as getting there by airplane.

(This "trip" reminds me of the ONE time—as an adult—that I decided, out of keeping with my usual sedentary winter habits, to go sledding. I thought it would take me back to my wintry childhood. I was pretty excited. The first time down the hill, at Powderhorn Park, I hit a huge bump at the bottom, flew through the air, and injured my back, permanently. I never went sledding again. Am I destined not to try exciting, out-of-the-ordinary things?)

When we realized we couldn't get to the MoMA by 9 p.m., not even by 10:30 p.m., NO WAY, NO HOW, and that our next-day flight from New York to Chicago, scheduled for 1:30 p.m., didn't leave us time to even see the show in the morning, we decided to give it up. (We found out later that during the first few weeks of the show it was open to "members only," so we wouldn't have been able to get in anyway.)

(The 1964 film "Zorba the Greek" with Anthony Quinn came to mind. Zorba convinces his Englishman friend (Alan Bates) to build a sluice to convey logs to a factory that the friend owns. The friend invests

his entire inheritance in the project. When the sluice comes crashing down as the first log goes flying through, all is lost. It's a moment of bitter disappointment, but not for long. After that they start dancing the sirtaki and kind of just let it go. Life goes on.)

I took comfort in the most excellent sandwich I had brought from the Minneapolis airport D'Amicos restaurant and ate a very pretty yogurt parfait from the O'Hare Starbucks. That was MY "sirtaki." Slowly, slowly, I'm letting it go. Life goes on.

The airline said they would refund us the unused portion of our flight, and give us a hotel voucher for future use (we're still waiting), but our dilemma in O'Hare that night was of no concern to them. There was no flight back to Minneapolis until the next day. There was no Amtrak until the next day. There was the possibility of an expensive car rental made worse by the $4-a-gallon gas prices of that week, but we were both too worn out to try to drive all night. Our solution was to take the Greyhound bus, leaving from downtown Chicago at 9:15 p.m. We raced to catch the El from the airport and got to the bus station in time, with the help of a "tour guide" we picked up on the street.

The bus was packed to the gills. By the time my daughter and I got on, one out of every pair of seats was occupied, so we couldn't sit next to each other.

I could understand that it was necessary to have the air conditioning on because of all the people, but it was nevertheless unpleasantly chilly. It helped that I sat next to a very large, warm person. We arrived in Minneapolis at 6 a.m. and walked to Nicollet Avenue to catch the bus to Lake Street and then another bus to my house.

What a night. I was stiff and aching for two days after we got back.

And the pain of missing the opening still smarts.

Neighborhood leadership grant awarded to Carei Thomas

Southside Pride, September 1998
BY ELAINE KLAASSEN

There is only one Carei Thomas. He makes more music with two fingers than a lot of people do with 10. Since a crippling illness five years ago, Thomas, a master of musical improvisation, has limited use of individual fingers. He says when he plays the piano “it’s no ‘Flight of the Bumblebee.’ ” He sometimes uses the keyboard as percussion and sometimes plays slow beautiful melodies. Sometimes he creates sound environments using a synthesizer. Because his music is so integrated with his “selfness” he will make music any way he can.

Thomas’ flexibility and adaptability have been well known for years. In Carei-lore, the story goes that he once arrived at a gig to play the piano, the instrument had no keyboard, but it was not a problem: He played inside on the strings.

Carei Thomas, a South Minneapolis neighbor and friend, community leader and accomplished and inspired musician, received a St. Paul Companies Leadership Initiatives in Neighborhoods (LIN) grant earlier this year for Gift Shops, which is meant to foster neighborhood talent.

According to the grant application, “It’s an inter-generational, neighborhood-based creative process that involves residents sharing their skills and artistic talents in ways that integrate into the fabric of everyday community life.”

Thomas says, “I’m just another one of us trying to keep the gates open to affirm our gifting.” His life helps explain what Gift Shops can be. As musical director of the Interact Center for Visual and Performing Arts, a performing group for physically challenged and specially-abled people gifted in varying arts disciplines, Thomas is in a unique position to act as a resource person, networking talented people with Gift Shops. Thomas is an artist, heartist, who loves people. Thomas the community leader and Thomas the musician are one and the same person.

Since at least the ’70s, artists have been talking about the line between art and life. I used to know a guy who wanted to “make his life a work of art.” Art is continually being redefined. Art is no longer considered just “the work,” the end result of the process, the object that can be bought, sold and possessed. People are asking if art is about producing works or if art is the way you go about your job at Walgreens, for example. The art in Thomas’ performances and recordings is obvious. I think his life in the community is also a work of art, a poem.

His art is his life, his life is his art. It’s a world of content substance, no fluff. It makes sense. He knows what to play when, or when to play what, because he’s always listening. There are surprises. There is excessive beauty. Intelligence and sensuality are everything. Virtuosity is neither here nor there.

In life and in music Thomas tries to create structures and structured improvisations in which people can meet the demands of the structures by “elevating and broadening the design with their selfness.” No one is “straitjacketed.” He sees light in sound and light in people. “There is art in everyone.” This is the spirit of Gift Shops.

Throughout his life, Thomas has responded to many styles of music. In the first half of his life he soaked up the influence of every imaginable kind of music, from jazz to gospel to rhythm and blues to 12-tone to classical to neoclassical to Celtic to bluegrass. “In a quasi-candid way I can play in different styles

because those voices are in me … I'm easily sensitized by energy in my surroundings, saturated by what's around me." He's open to people in the same way.

Adulation is not satisfying for Thomas. Praise is too static; he is only satisfied if his work goes somewhere and does something. "Art is saving if it is circular." If his work/life moves someone, then their work/life will move someone else and it continues on and on. "I don't do artsy entertainment. After a performance I want us all to feel fresher and cleaner, to be provoked to think about the person next to us."

I've known Carei Thomas for many years. When he won the much deserved Bush Fellowship in 1993, his friends were ecstatic. His concert at the Walker Art Center soon after, in which he invited his mother, Mary, to play an unusual instrument called a flexitone, was nothing less than celebratory. A few weeks later, Thomas presented a fascinating class in an eclectic music appreciation series to kids in my church. They created an avant-garde piece of music using sounds corresponding to numbers and colors.

The next time I had news of him was nearly two years later when I learned he was recovering from a rare, life-threatening illness, Guillain-Barre syndrome. Since then, in the course of his recovery, Thomas has played with many Minneapolis performers in venues such as the Landmark Center, Patrick's Cabaret, the Loring Bar, artists' studios and Powderhorn Park.

Besides his music, people come to hear Carei's discourses. He doesn't talk to hear himself talk, although he does love to talk. He's always educating. He often lists names of great artists as a reference to a certain consciousness or as a suggestion of a body of work to investigate. And he gifts his audiences with rare honesty. During the early part of his recovery, he dramatized his feelings of despair and childlike dependency, screaming, "Mommy, Mommy!" It was heartbreaking and helped us to understand.

Carei says, "The intimacy is the important thing …We need familiarity. We're living in a sneaky feelingless period, a kind of panexternalism. We need intimate places where you can give what you have the way you are."

Inside Eternity at Artrujillo

Pulse, March 23, 2005
BY MARY ANN VINCENTA

The classical and elegant exhibit *Inside Eternity* challenges our temporal map. It is a library of timeless, floating dreams. The sculptor Natasha Dikarev and the painter Vladimir Dikarev tell us there is a beautiful place to live—for real—outside the stupid and evil cruelties of history, outside that which is petty, and outside the rat race, even as we inhabit our particular streets and calendar dates. The father-daughter team grounds us in our true home—the universality of mythology, philosophy, sacred text and the collective unconscious. They show us the touchstones of life that are found when all veneers are peeled away.

Natasha Dikarev's sculptures hum with life. Many are columns of coarse clay and steel rods whose stability represent surprising engineering feats. Lying on the floor around the bases are broken pieces of different unglazed ceramic pots, arranged to look like a glued-on mosaic. They perhaps symbolize the broken bits of the world made bearable by composing them into an aesthetically pleasing form that simulates permanence. Ceramic faces of coarse clay and marvelously employed stains and glazes, many of them on the pillars, evoke ancient Babylonia, Iberia, Greece. One, "Yet another muse," gazes through her glassy, turquoise, powerful eyes at some ecstatic vision she sees across the harbor, through whose waters we imagine she has just come, her upwardly spiraling hair twisted and glistening.

Other than the pillars, which are from Dikarev's MFA show, *Temple of Lost Connections*, there are whimsical, delightful pieces, such as "Egg-O-Centrism of the Soul" and "Fishing for Answers," which take a light look at ego and doubt.

The colors of Vladimir Dikarev's paintings are alluring in their tranquil brightness. Their sensuality is arresting and ethereal. A white, luminous figure with her back to the viewer fills the canvas of "Awaiting," a very large watercolor. One could get lost in the precise and extravagant details of spilled wine, overflowing candle wax and the shimmering tablecloth, as well as in the woman's dilemma. A funny little ship is already well within view but she continues to wait. Perhaps it isn't the right ship. Or perhaps she is locked into the habit of waiting.

In other paintings, recognizable, realistic images are configured strangely or placed in unexpected contexts, creating a humorous, and somewhat depressing, effect. "Philosopher Travelling in a Shell," another large watercolor, is a reference to Socrates and the barrel he wore. A bearded face wearing sun goggles looks upward from the strange two-legged contraption in which he is riding. There is no visible means of locomotion in the desolate landscape of sand, water and candy-colored decorative arches.

Artrujillo, run by Alejandro Trujillo, is an exhibition space that is open not only to artists of all cultures, but, as Alejandro put it, to artists "from the most humble to the most advanced." The artists of *Inside Eternity* are obviously advanced. They have studied art since their youth and dominate their craft as easily as most people walk and breathe. Art is a way of life for this close-knit Ukrainian family, which also includes a composer, a documentarian, a graphic designer and a writer.

In 1996, 10 years after the nuclear accident at Chernobyl, not far from their home, Natasha set off for the United States. She hoped to find a cleaner, safer environment for her daughter. She paved the way, or, as she said, "shoveled the ground," for the rest of her family to come.

They share deep humanity, wisdom and beauty, which is a gift to our fledgling culture and should be noted.

The exhibit runs through April 17 at Artrujillo, 349 13th Ave. NE., Mpls. (east of University). 612-821-9076. Gallery hours are Noon – 10 p.m.Tues-Sat, and 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sun.

Contemporary Chinese art: The collection of Pat Hui

Pulse, June 22, 2005
BY MARY ANN VINCENTA

An exhilarating collection of two-dimensional works by contemporary Chinese artists will fill the spacious walls of the Katherine Nash Gallery until the end of July. Many pieces are so sublime they give you that bursting-in-your-chest, elevated-to-midair feeling. It is astonishing to see the mystique of a 3500-year-old tradition influenced by Western expressionism and abstraction. You'll recognize the poetry, painting and calligraphy, typically intertwined in Chinese art, as well as the rigorous techniques used to depict the majestic breadth of the natural world. You'll also recognize the restless energy, fragmentation and coloring of Western art. You'll see collaborations between painters, calligraphers and poets; immense vitality; exploding ink paintings; the Grand Canyon; computer generated calligraphy. There's too much to mention. This is a noteworthy time in the history of Chinese art, since the West had little effect on China until the 20th century.

Artist and art collector Pat Hui, whose collection this is, finds herself at the epicenter of contemporary Chinese art. She lives in Minneapolis and runs Hui Arts, a gallery in the warehouse district. The color of her clothing is in the same palette with her paintings. Friends and well-wishers surround her.

She comments, with a twinkle in her eye, on the benefits of bringing expressionism into Chinese art: "It's freedom from trees and mountains."

There is a noticeable absence of the human face and figure throughout the show. Hui says it is her personal preference. She likes abstract, nonrepresentational art.

Only the modern, scrawling calligraphy, unlike the reassuringly perfect letters on the scrolls in museums, seems to be somewhat representational. If you read Chinese, the characters are legible, but if not, they look like crowds of people, dancing or running into the woods, or demonstrating for a cause. The experimentation with calligraphy is unique in that there have been few changes in written Chinese since 1300.

Jovial personal notes by Hui are posted next to the works. They tell about her life and her friendship with the artists. In 1961 she met Wucius Wong, now a well-known painter in Hong Kong. Wong led her to standout 20th century Hong Kong painter Lui Shou-kwan—one of the first Chinese painters to embrace abstraction—who became her teacher.

Hui started collecting art in 1980. She had gone to visit an artist named Chui Tze-hung, who lived in a room so small he had to put a piece of wood over his bed while he was painting and then take it off when he wanted to go to bed. His paintings were bigger than his room. Hui was so moved by his work and his circumstances that she started buying his paintings. Then, in Toronto, she established a gallery and, although she wasn't rich, continued to meet artists and buy their work. Artists began giving her their work, and a lovingly tended collection was born.

Katherine E. Nash Gallery in U of M Regis Center for Art, 405 21st Ave .S. West Bank Campus
Summer gallery hours: Tue., Wed., Fri. and Sat. 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., and Thu.10 a.m. to 8 p.m.
Show runs until July 28. Free and open to the public.

The Enneagram: Self knowledge leads to tolerance and understanding

SSP Spirit and Conscience for website, May 2017
BY ELAINE KLAASSEN

After the shock of the national election results I felt a sense of impending doom. I still do. I am afraid for myself as an elder person on Medicare, I am afraid for immigrants and for all people facing danger in the world even more than before. I am afraid especially for descendants of the people who were here when the Europeans came and for descendants of people who were brought here enslaved. The chance that America as a whole will respect, honor and value people with those histories seems smaller than ever.

So, in this emotional situation, like many, many people, I felt like I had to DO something. But what? Maybe something outward and something inward? We the People was offering a class on the U.S. Constitution. Since I felt that I needed to fill in the empty spaces in my knowledge of the United States of America, I signed up. I was newly shocked every time I went—it turns out there's been a fight for justice and the well-being of the people since Day #1. Constitution class was kind of like turning outward. The three-session class on the Enneagram was more like turning inward.

Since extreme polarization is choking our society right now, I thought doing inner work, i.e., self-knowledge work, such as the Enneagram, would ground me in my quest to communicate with many different kinds of people. I was impressed at the very first OurRevolution meeting at St. Peter's AME Church when our newly elected Representative to the State Legislature Omar Ilhan encouraged respectful conversations with people who might think very differently—no name-calling, she said. At the same meeting, an environmental activist woman gave an example of a respectful conversation in which she had stood her ground [without a gun] with someone very "other" and had had a mild moment of mutual understanding.

The Enneagram is a system for organizing and understanding the different types of people in the world based on many different streams of ancient wisdom such as Sufism and the Kabbalah. It was put together in the 1960s in Chile by a Bolivian named Oscar Ichazo. If you google the Enneagram you will see that scientists don't put much stock in it. They don't acknowledge that people are divided into nine basic types. Nine categories. (On the website of The Enneagram Institute, the types are named as The Reformer, The Helper, The Achiever, The Individualist, The Investigator, The Loyalist, The Enthusiast, The Challenger and The Peacemaker.) The Enneagram is clearly not an absolute, but I can absolutely see the benefits of it as a working hypothesis. I see it as a useful tool.

I learned about the Enneagram at a series of three classes presented by Kate Ostrem from 9Open Doors at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church last winter. In her opening intro, Ostrem said something about the Enneagram being a path to world peace. It makes sense: Little by little I learned that the whole thing is an exercise in tolerance, open-mindedness.

To get started, what you do is read nine paragraphs (they aren't really paragraphs, they are groups of sentences) and decide which group you identify with most. I read the three pages,

underlined every sentence or clause that I thought was true about myself, and then saw which group had the most underlines. It was the group of sentences labeled “4.” I wobbled a little bit over “6” and “9,” but ended up being pretty sure I identified most with No. 4.

In the meetings with Kate we had cards that identified four important things about each number, that is, each type. According to the Enneagram, those who identify as “4” have the following characteristics: They avoid ordinary living, focus on what is missing and forget that they belong; their blindspot is envy. Each of the nine categories, or types, has a parallel description: Each one has something they avoid, something they focus on, something they forgot and a blindspot. I knew I was a “4” because that was the only one where I could stretch those descriptions to make them seem true in some way. The other ones were blatantly incorrect and no amount of imagination could make them fit for me.

As Kate was describing the different numbers and adding on to what we had already encountered, I found myself thinking, “Wow, I’m glad I’m not a ‘7,’ ” or, “I’m glad I’m not a ‘3,’ ” etc. Wow. Pretty judgmental of me. Gradually, though, I saw that each number (each type) has some good and some not so good traits, and that every trait, whether good or bad on the surface, always has the potential to show another side. When the sessions ended, I felt like all the numbers were very interesting and totally valid. I even felt like a “4” was valid. The biggest benefit I have received from the Enneagram is that I tolerate myself a lot more.

I asked a former boyfriend who is still a friend to read the three pages and underline everything he thought was true about himself. He was clearly a “5.” Then it was easier to understand why our relationship didn’t work. And then the lingering feeling that our difficulties were caused by my defects kind of dissipated.

Now I am more tolerant toward him and more tolerant toward myself. It’s OK to be a “4,” And it’s OK to be a “5,” and a “6,” and a “7,” etc. We’re all in the same messy, complicated human boat.

It made me wonder if the affirmation I received from validating my own type as well as all the others might not be so necessary for men. Society kind of confers on them the message “It’s totally OK to be you” from the beginning, at least the men of my generation. I thought maybe that’s why there were more women than men in the class.

I asked Kate Ostrem about it later and she said, “While I am reluctant to classify the Enneagram as a ‘woman's thing,’ in my experience, I have taught more women than men.” At the same time, she said, “I have worked with a number of male clients, both individually and within workplace settings where they have hired me to work with their teams. And there are a number of men among the leading teachers of the Enneagram, like David Daniels, Russ Hudson and Jerry Wagner.”

On the internet most of the leaders of Enneagram teaching are men. Helen Palmer and Ginger Lapid-Bogda are exceptions; the book Ostrem recommended to me was one of Palmer’s.

One of the most powerful things about engaging with the path of the Enneagram is that you yourself identify your type. Somebody else, like the leader who is knowledgeable in the Enneagram, doesn't say, "Oh, you seem like a '2,' " for example. It's not about learning how to figure out what number someone else is. It's only about figuring out what type you are, according to yourself, not someone else's opinion. The reason that only you can determine your own type is that motivation is ultimately the main thing you are identifying about yourself, and that is something no one else can truly know.

This kind of work might seem like frivolous navel-gazing, especially in our political climate, but I think it's necessary to have this awareness. As you come to understand your own type and a lot about other types, you are more able to put yourself in someone else's shoes, that is, picture someone else's reality. It opens your imagination. At the same time, you feel less dubious about yourself and can more easily trust your own truth. The increased tolerance for your own life, and actual trust in your own life, leads to compassion for yourself. And that compassion radiates out to more easily embrace the lives of others.

‘A Family Torn Apart’ by Justina D. Neufeld

SSP Spirit and Conscience, July 2007
BY ELAINE KLAASSEN

The book “A Family Torn Apart” is a heart-rending and heart-pounding story. The narrator relates in first person what happens when war and political forces that have nothing whatsoever to do with people who are just trying to live their lives, grow their crops, celebrate their holidays and love their families cause untold devastation amongst them. Her story gives new meaning to the expression “Life’s not fair.” What happens to innocent civilians in wartime is never fair. By the same token, many people, unfairly, never experience the tight-knit loyalty, warmth and tenderness of the author’s family of origin. How do ordinary people survive the most unthinkable tragedies? From Justina D. Neufeld’s vivid narrative we can only conclude that they survive because they have their love for each other.

Neufeld, the last of 10 children, was born 13 years after the Russian Revolution of 1917. She grew up in the Ukraine in a small settlement of German pacifist Mennonites who had lived there since 1798, when Catherine the Great invited Mennonites in Prussia and Holland to farm the land and promised them exemption from military duty. (Other German groups moved to the Ukraine at that time as well.) For 100 years the Mennonites were honored in Russia for producing farm machinery and large amounts of grain. After the revolution they were seen as wealthy oppressors, and foreigners besides—they had consistently kept to themselves, speaking German and continuing their religious traditions. During the first years of civil unrest after 1917 they were pillaged by bandits, as well as by the Red and White armies, and later, when collectivization was enforced, reduced to poverty. Despite the arrest of all their pastors, their culture remained intact; they maintained their faith, their rigorous standards, belief in education, and high degree of competence, as well as their long history of persecution.

Life under German occupation was easier, but the presence of the German army made them a target for Soviet bombs. In 1943, as the German army retreated, their whole village, along with other villages, fled west toward Europe by horse and wagon. Neufeld and other family members arrived in a refugee camp in Poland four months later. Eventually Neufeld reached safety in Holland, and at age 17 was adopted by a family in southern Minnesota. Her tight-knit family of 13 members had been scattered by that time; at the book’s printing, in 2003, she continued to search for them. The strong bond Neufeld felt for her family was what made it possible to get through the hardship and hunger of her childhood, as well as the horror of her father’s arrest and disappearance. Although her life was more comfortable in the United States, she entered into a completely different level of suffering as she longed to see her family again.

In the first part of the book, before the Exodus, Neufeld describes in captivating detail, the earthy simplicity of life in their village. Against the background of terror and fear, I could hear the daily singing of her mother and her “Tante” (her great-aunt who lived with them). I could smell the animals and the tiny house where everyone had one set of clothes and no bathtub. I could smell the Sunday dinner cooked in the manure-brick burning stove, as well as the dusty, cold absence of food in the extreme famine years. I felt like I was right there with this spirited, fanciful, very observant child who noticed everything and felt things deeply. Her memories, by turns, are humorous, complex and thoughtful. With flowers and bits of broken dishes found in the stream she tried to beautify her plain surroundings. She saw the clouds as “big bowls of popcorn.” She loved the squishy mud between her “winter white” toes. She gave names to the children she believed she would have someday. She was intrigued with visiting gypsies and peddlers.

In the middle part of the book, the chaos of war is overwhelming. I was infuriated at the fact that there even exists such a concept as “nationality.” It seemed ludicrous that people should be defined as Russian, or German, or American or French or anything else. When Neufeld, along with her three youngest brothers, her one sister, her mother and Tante, arrived at the refugee camp in Poland, her brothers were

immediately naturalized as German citizens and inducted into the military. Later they were captured by the Americans and became prisoners of war. Another brother, earlier, had been drafted into the Soviet army. (Neufeld nails the irony of having a brother in the "winning" army and three brothers in the "losing" army: the irony of war as she watches POWs in the streets of Brussels. "As far down the street as I could see they kept coming— an endless column of prisoners. When I had seen them in their dapper uniforms in my village back home these young men had been victors. They had been our liberators from communism. Now they were defeated. I could not fathom how they once could have been our heroes and now be our enemies.")

"Russians," like Neufeld, her brother and his family, who had made it to France, were hunted by Russian authorities. According to the Yalta Agreement, the German Mennonites from the Ukraine were in danger of being sent back to Russia, but they were rescued by German Mennonites from America, who got them into Holland. Other "Russians" in her family, who had made it to the West, were repatriated to work camps in Siberia.

In the last part of the book we find out the results of Neufeld's search for her family members: With some she was reunited; with others she exchanged letters and was able to send food; others are still missing. She writes a small biography of each of the 13 people, witnessing the meaning and strength of their lives.

Neufeld's voice is clear and graceful. Her dignified, understated style dramatizes the pathos in a way that pyrotechnics never can. Throughout the book she simply tells the story. It's the only way: When so much suffering occurs, it's incomprehensible, it doesn't compute, you can't fit it into a reasonable mental framework. She doesn't veer into philosophy, speculating on the nature of evil; or into politics, deciding which "side" is good, and which one bad; or into theology, pondering whether God has anything to do with anything. But she often refers to the religious beliefs of people around her, her brothers' arguments with her mother about the existence of God, and her own attempts to bargain with God.

The distinct flavor of Mennonite culture—particular foods, singing as a bedrock of existence, the physical hardiness, the patient acceptance of suffering, the reserved self-expression—permeates the book. Certainly Mennonites will especially empathize with Neufeld's story, but it is evident that her story represents a larger story. It is the microcosm of millions of innocent civilians caught in the crossfire of wars, civil unrest and political forces outside their control, their lives forever disrupted and their dreams forever lost.

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A film should be made about an attractive, tender couple that finds true love in the late autumn of their lives. She's a successful retired mental health nurse and administrator, a German Mennonite who came to the U.S. in 1947, right after WWII. He's a retired, gentle pastor who lost his first wife to cancer. He's crazy about his new wife's laughter, her luminous spirit. She, after one failed marriage, has finally found her soul mate. Together, they are loved and respected by a large community of Mennonites on the plains of Kansas.

He knows she grew up in the Ukraine after the Revolution of 1917, escaped to Europe as an adolescent when war came to her village, and was adopted at age 17 by a family in southern Minnesota. But he wants to know the whole story, every detail. As he types her handwritten pages, the story unfolds.

The viewers would experience the happy ending to her story and be amazed at the couple's courage to seize love—his courage in marrying someone so shattered with losses, and her courage to embrace love after spending a lifetime suffering the pain of unthinkable loss.

The viewers would also experience a vivid example of the devastating, monstrous effects of war and political forces on individual lives—what happens to innocent civilians caught in the crossfire.

So far, we don't have the film, just the riveting book by Justina D. Neufeld, "A Family Torn Apart" (Pandora Press, Kitchener, Ont., 2003).

Restorative justice: No one is an island, No one stands alone

SSP Spirit and Conscience, November 2006
BY ELAINE KLAASSEN

In “Changing Lenses: A New Focus for Crime & Justice” (published in 1990), Howard Zehr writes that our current criminal justice system fails on three counts: It fails to deter crime, it fails to hold offenders accountable and it fails to meet the needs of victims.

The book opens with a scene depicting a violent crime. The reader can see how it was possible for that crime to occur; the reader can see how it was possible for the violence to escalate. Yet the offender is not excused and the victim is not blamed.

From there on, Zehr elaborates his vision of what justice could mean for the offender and the victim and how a more holistic sense of justice could deter crime. Drawing on practices and attitudes from Europe in the Middle Ages and biblical models, he defines restorative justice.

Restorative justice asks two essential questions: What does the victim need in order to recover power, autonomy and dignity? And, what does the offender need in order to make things right and to be restored into a right relationship with fellow human beings.

The victim must never be left out of the justice process. The victim is the first person who should be listened to, not the last. Restorative justice asks who has been harmed and where restitution needs to take place. It defines crime as an event where human beings have been harmed rather than an event in which the law has been broken. In order for offenders to be accountable they must have the support they need to be able to feel remorse and then be provided with the opportunity to make things right, as much as that is possible. Acknowledging ways in which offenders have been victimized in their lives restores them to a level of human dignity that allows them to feel guilt or remorse. Zehr argues that punishment and retribution keep people in the past and don’t allow them to go forward, to change and solve problems.

Zehr suggests the possibility that through restorative justice, governments and corporations can also be called to account for harms they have done to people, and be given the opportunity also to repent and make things right.

In the many reprintings of “Changing Lenses,” each with its respective appendix, Zehr modifies concepts, speaks to criticism and reconsiders ideas. His journey is anything but static.

Zehr’s experience as a minority student at Morehouse College, the historic African-American men’s college in Atlanta, Ga., his doctorate in the history of science and his work as an international photojournalist all contribute to his ever-developing concept of restorative justice. His writing is passionate but not fanatic, methodical but never boring. The book explains so much history not known by very many people—kind of like the other Howard Z. (Zinn). Zehr brings a wide range of cultural, historical and theological knowledge to his pursuit of true justice for all.

The only difficulty I see is that since our culture in the United States of America is not homogeneous, nor cohesive, but rather individualistic, alienated and polarized, it is hard to imagine restorative justice becoming the norm. But by applying principles of restorative justice, in community programs, for example, we might become a more homogeneous and cohesive, less alienated culture.

The need for restorative justice

I was called for jury duty in 1995. It changed my life. When it was over, social justice became my focus. A year later I started writing for Southside Pride, took a course at United Theological Seminary and became involved in the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP).

When I was placed on a six-person jury in a civil case, I was disturbed by the adversarial nature of the proceedings, that is, the certain win-lose outcome. The other distressing thing was the requirement that we, the jury in the civil case, decide one tiny fragment of the case without a lot of necessary information. Based on what we knew (which was hardly anything), we had to decide if a certain thing did or did not occur. We had no idea what would happen to the plaintiff or the defendant as a result of what we decided. It was like being in a large factory with lots of heavy machinery and a panel of buttons, one of which you are required to push without knowing what will happen when you do. I felt powerless.

During the question and answer period after the trial I asked the judge why this case hadn't been settled in mediation. He said it had been attempted. Typically, according to "Changing Lenses," civil cases focus on repairing harm that has been done, unlike criminal cases. In that respect, our case was particularly confusing, since it didn't appear to us that any harm had even been done.

After the trial was over I said to one of the other jurors that cases should be solved by a tribal council, or something similar, where everyone could talk things through and come to a solution. It would be so much less fragmented and compartmentalized. In our particular case, in spite of no apparent damage, we knew there was definitely conflict. It was easy to speculate that class and race differences were involved, a factor that obviously makes justice in our non-homogeneous society especially difficult. I kept saying there should be a more humane, less adversarial approach. I was also talking about my commitment to nonviolence on all levels, which he thought was great but impractical. He said my ideas were "like a tiny drop of water in the ocean."

At that point I knew vaguely about the work of Howard Zehr on issues that had to do with justice, but I hadn't yet read his definitive book, the previously mentioned "Changing Lenses." When Zehr came to Hamline University this past fall to receive a lifetime achievement award for his work in restorative justice, I finally did read it. I wanted to underline every sentence. I kept exclaiming, "That's exactly it." Apparently a lot of people have felt that way.

Wikepedia and a few other sources call Zehr (it rhymes with care) a "pioneer" in restorative justice. At first his work was a "drop of water in the ocean." He started out as director of the first Victim/Offender Reconciliation program in the United States in the 1970s. Twelve books followed, some co-written with other writers; programs in restorative justice and books on the subject have multiplied 100-fold since then; and it has grown into a worldwide social movement. It was exciting to see the conference at Hamline, perhaps another little droplet in the ocean, where religious leaders, lawyers and judges explored the implementation of restorative justice. The many awards Zehr has received over the years confirm the widespread interest in and affirmation of the restorative justice mentality.

In his acceptance speech at Hamline, he said, "When I was writing "Changing Lenses" I often thought I would be a laughing stock. But I wasn't, and I shouldn't have been surprised. I think I was basically pulling together what everyone already knows. This is certainly true for people from many indigenous or traditional systems, but it is also true for most of us: People sometimes comment that they had many of the ideas that restorative justice incorporates but had never put them all together."

This past July Zehr was in Japan, where the recently translated "Changing Lenses" has been widely circulated, for a two-week speaking tour in which he spoke every day to packed rooms. One of the days, a reporter attached himself to Zehr in the morning and asked questions all day long. There was significant press coverage of his tour. According to "Changing Lenses," restorative justice principles are not at all alien to the Japanese justice system.

Since the first printing of "Changing Lenses" Zehr has come into contact with First Nations in Canada and Maoris in New Zealand, whose justice systems have a lot in common with what the book describes. Zehr continues to work with indigenous people to expand his understanding.

Restorative justice at home
There are many variations of restorative justice work going on in the Twin Cities at the present. There are many formats, such as panels, circles, conferencing and victim/offender reconciliation. There's the Midtown Community Restorative Justice group, a program of Phillips Powderhorn Neighborhood Association. They organize panels to meet with clients 18 and older that are referred by the courts and offer an opportunity to make amends. Community members can be trained to sit on the panels. Cyndi Butler is the contact person at 612-728-7506 (Wed. & Fri.). Joan Vanhalla works in the Seward and Longfellow neighborhoods in a partnership youth restorative justice program. Restorative Justice is taught at the U of M, St. Thomas and Hamline, as well as many other colleges and universities, including Eastern Mennonite University, where Zehr is professor of restorative justice and co-director of the Center for Justice and Peace-Building.

White supremacy: Once again preaching to the choir

SSP Spirit and Conscience for website, December 2016

BY ELAINE KLAASSEN

My concern with racism and white supremacy in America began long before the recent election. It has been present in American society and government since the beginning. It is something that the U.S. government, on the face of it anyway, during my lifetime, has mostly always been against. Now, that has changed. Officially, on the day of the inauguration, in January 2017, we will be a white supremacist racist nation.

Domination

White supremacy goes beyond what many people mean by the word racism, that is, when one group of people doesn't like another group of people. White supremacy is not just white people not liking black/brown people. Many groups of people don't like each other, and many cultural groups like to stick together. That's natural. I don't even worry about that.

White supremacy, what I call racism, is a belief that people with white skin, and the system created by people with white skin, own everyone else. It was white people (although Africans and descendants of Africans have been slave owners) who believed that enslaved human beings from Africa could be owned—literally bought and sold. Columbus believed that the indigenous people he "discovered" living in the land that he named America belonged to him and his backers. This history is not over. And I do worry about this.

How can one person own another? Slavery is one way, and sometimes it happens in marriage. He thinks she is property that he needs to take care of, that is, maintain, like a car or a boat. Not only does he own her, he owns the marriage itself, which he bought with an expensive courtship. He is in charge and is responsible for everything. She wants to buy a new car. "Honey, what do you think about getting a new car? I mean, it doesn't have to be a new one, just a better one that doesn't break down all the time." He says, "I can't buy you a car." He doesn't punish her for wanting a new car. But as far as he is concerned, it's up to him to decide, she has no voice. A car is not something they would buy together.

In the U.S., there is a certain group in charge. White people. The white system. It's up to the white system to decide. The white system says, "I can't give you freedom just yet," to the enslaved people. "I can't let you roam the countryside hunting for buffalo," to the indigenous people. "You can basically do what I allow you to do. You won't have a place at the table unless I invite you. And even then, you will still be my guest. We won't be putting on the party together." It could be that in 500 years, people of all races and backgrounds will be putting on the party together.

In my 20s I worked for a disgusting man at a job in Madrid, Spain. I only lasted about four months—four months too many. My job was to use a dictaphone to type out his spoken translations from Spanish into English of telephone repair manuals. Whenever he wanted to indicate "continued," he would say "cunt."

More offensive than his abbreviation, though, was what he said, over and over, in social conversations: White people were clearly superior to other races because they had the capacity to dominate other races. They were stronger and smarter and could crush anyone they chose. "Might is right." This boss, born and raised in Hollywood, Calif., cited the example of the Spanish Empire in South America and the British Empire in Africa and India. (At that time, I don't think people had yet started thinking of the United States as the U.S. Empire.) As a white male, and member of the ruling class, he seemed completely confident in the truth of his analysis. I had never met anyone who expressed such ideas. I don't know how common it was for U.S. citizens at that time to openly assert the kinds of claims he was making. (Maybe he was only talking like that because we were living under Franco in Spain's fascist dictatorship and he wanted to be on the good side of the dictator in case Franco was listening.)

It's almost as though if you drink the water in the U.S., you turn into a white supremacist. It's the story everyone believes, even if they are not white. It's a totally fascist story. It's the story of a superior race, a superior color even. How crazy is that? When I hear about friends of a friend of mine from the Democratic Republic of Congo using bleach to whiten their skin, I am appalled and deeply saddened that they feel they're inferior the way they are.

Around 6,000 young black men are murdered every year, mostly by other black men. Do they also adopt the national belief system, that they are inferior and don't deserve anything better than to die from a bullet at a young age?

My friend Nick Boswell, an Ojibwe elder who has been active on behalf of Native Americans for many years, holds a bachelor's degree in sociology and master's degrees in human services and Adlerian psychology; is a wounded and decorated veteran of the wars in Korea and Vietnam; and is an upstanding Muslim, has written a paper called "Historical Trauma of the American Indian People." He writes, "Our American Indian experience is the psycho-social impact, depending upon a particular tribe's geographic location and historical experience, of from one to five hundred years of the most brutal genocide, ethnocide and forced acculturation the world has ever seen. The effect of this holocaustic experience for both the individual and the tribal group is, of course, trauma. The result of this trauma is a condition that has come to be known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)."

He describes the coping patterns created by PTSD that are passed down from one generation to the next. There is a terrible self-destructive strain that has developed within the Native community and expresses itself as alcoholism. Boswell cites the statistic that of all American Indian deaths in Minnesota from 2000 to 2007, 42% were related to alcohol. He's describing the collective, understandable despair brought on by domination, not some natural inferiority.

I wrote an article in Southside Pride (Phillips/Powderhorn edition, December 2002) called "Violence against Indians is illegal." The title is sarcastic. It's a statement that shouldn't have to be said. It should go without saying that violence against Indians is illegal. That's how I hear Black Lives Matter. It should be a fact that goes without saying, but, tragically, it is not. That's why it has to be said: "Black lives matter." Where there's the owner and the owned, the owner assumes he/she matters more than those who are owned. In the U.S. where white supremacy reigns supreme, those in power still believe they own, and control, African Americans and

Indigenous people. According to the national narrative of white supremacy, "Violence against Indians is legal," and "Black lives don't matter."

Two famous doctrines are behind the belief in white supremacy: the doctrine of discovery and the doctrine of manifest destiny. The first was an international law based on a papal bull of the 15th century that said anyone who wasn't Christian and anything belonging to anyone who wasn't Christian belonged to whichever Christian discovered them. So when Columbus "discovered" "America" the people already here were not Christian and were instantly claimed by Columbus. Then, even though Thomas Jefferson was against it, and even though the U.S. theoretically believed in separation of church and state, the doctrine of discovery was incorporated into U.S. law and therefore gave legal justification for the breaking of all treaties established with indigenous people—because they weren't Christian.

The second doctrine was manifest destiny, a more complicated concept and more disputed. Generally it held that American democracy (created by white men) was exceptional and should be spread throughout the western part of the U.S. There was some notion of divine destiny involved, too, which justified all expansion. Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant and John Quincy Adams were not great supporters of the idea, according to Wikipedia.

Maintaining the Story

The notion of black criminality and inferiority has been well-developed by the white power structure in the U.S. to justify slavery—denigrate the victim and justify the crime of slavery. I have heard about this process from Dr. Joy DeGruy, and it's also in her book "Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing (PTSS)."

Not only does vilifying the victim protect the perpetrator from acknowledging their own guilt, which is a psychological, internal spiritual problem for perpetrators who want to think well of themselves, but keeping the victim powerless is a solution to the more practical problem of expected retaliation. Whenever one group of people does excessive damage to another group of people, the perpetrator group is always afraid of the victim group. That's a natural reaction. The perpetrator knows that revenge would be justified, so in order to prevent retaliation and stay in control, the perpetrators need to paint the victims in the worst possible light—to keep them down, to keep them from justifiably lashing back.

The press, in collusion with the U.S. government, has contributed to the negative image of black/brown people. Juan Gonzalez, in "News for all the People: The Epic Story of Race and the American media," writes in the introduction and goes on to demonstrate throughout the book: "It is our contention that newspapers, radio and television played a pivotal role in perpetuating racist views among the general population. They did so by routinely portraying non-white minorities as threats to white society and by reinforcing racial ignorance, group hatred and discriminatory government policies. The news media thus assumed primary authorship of a deeply flawed national narrative: the creation myth of heroic European settlers battling an array of backward and violent non-white peoples to forge the world's greatest democratic republic."

In Johann Hari's book "Chasing the Scream," about the war on drugs, he describes the work of Harry Anslinger, the first commissioner of the U.S. Treasury Department's Federal Bureau of

Narcotics, in the early 1900s, who used his power to promote fear of racial minorities as he worked to stamp out drugs. Hari documents the crucial role played by Anslinger in killing Billie Holiday.

Hari shows how the war on drugs is carried out and how it contributes to the perception of black people as criminals. The fact is that of all the dealers, 19% are African American. Of all the dealers arrested for dealing, 64% are African American.

Hari says it's not racist cops (he spends a lot of time describing how un-racist cops can be as individuals), rather, it's a racist system. It arrests people least able to defend themselves (socially and legally) in order to meet a quota.

Clearly, white supremacy didn't go away with emancipation. There was a brief period between 1863 and 1877 when the Reconstruction Era, designed by Lincoln, permitted a striking climate of opportunity for equality, integration and enfranchisement, despite much controversy. But then with the overthrow of Reconstruction, in 1877, white supremacy and racism became the official, sanctioned mode of operation.

In her book, "The Family Tree," Karen Branan, who was born in the South in 1941, talks about how white supremacy was maintained there. "Early in life I was aware of the contradiction between what I was taught about black people and what I knew about the few who were in my life, such as Edna [her maid], other friends' maids, and our yard man, Roosevelt, all of whom I liked and trusted. Edna, I loved. But it would take years before I learned all the ways white people had constructed and then taught one another a caricature of blackness in order to stay in charge."

A veteran journalist, Branan also talks about the Lost Cause movement, "at the heart of which was the eternal crusade for white superiority." It was designed to unite poor and rich white people. I learned from her book that, "Since the early 1900s, mainstream, even liberal, magazines like Harpers, the Atlantic Monthly and Good Housekeeping often played their tune [white superiority attitudes of the Lost Cause movement]."

An article from November 1921 in a magazine called Scientific Monthly (the word "scientific" always suggests credibility) is called "Intelligence of Negroes as Compared with Whites." An unnamed writer discusses a study by Dr. George Oscar Ferguson Jr. of the University of Virginia. The writer says the conclusion of Dr. Ferguson's study is that "psychological study of the negro indicates that he will never be the mental equal of the white race." Although at the end of the article his remarks about African Americans' talent for imitation seem positive—"The negro has to make many adjustments. This must be remembered in any comparative estimate of his intelligence. How many white men would reveal so high an order of talent if they had to act, to dress and to talk like the black man in Africa?"—, it was a common perception in white circles of the past that "Negroes" were good at imitation, but not at thinking (hence they should not be allowed to vote).

Just as I was shocked to learn in my 20s there were people who believed white people were superior because they were able to dominate other peoples, I was shocked the other day to learn

from a friend who listens to talk radio 24/7 and reads the Drudge website daily that he believes Black Lives Matter and any kind of protest from minority groups asking to be heard and asking for civil rights and equality are nefarious plots encouraged by outside agitators (such as George Soros) and are designed to keep oppressed peoples disgruntled. So, with this belief system, there's no way the injustice perpetrated by the system against black people and Native people will ever be acknowledged or understood or grasped by the ruling class. Oppressed people can never be heard if they are seen as powerful enemies to be crushed. And, as long as white culture wants to maintain a good opinion of itself, the concerns of the victims will always be delegitimized.

Challenging the Story

My neighbor Isak Douah, 17, has been impacted by the racist national narrative. His physical appearance consists of black skin, very dark eyes and thick, African-looking hair. You can't tell by looking that culturally he's a unique mixture: His father is from Ivory Coast and his mother is from Iceland. But in American society he is simply a young black male and everything that that means.

Growing up in Minnesota, Isak has always been aware of his color. When Isak was in middle school, he was blamed for marijuana use, even though he was one of the few <u>not</u> smoking marijuana. He was removed from a bus about to leave for an out of town overnight field trip and searched. He felt he was suddenly regarded differently when he was no longer a little black boy. He realized he had grown into a big, "scary-looking black man," perceived as threatening and dangerous. They thought he was a "kingpin" that other kids would imitate. Somewhere I read that a black male of age 12 will usually be seen by a white person as 15 or 16.

The incident scarred him and he feels it affected his academic performance—he said it undermined his confidence too much.

The 2015 non-indictment of Darren Wilson, the police officer who shot Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo., produced a "social awakening." At South High, where Isak is now a senior, he has learned from his friends that violence against black people is systemic in this country and has a long history.

When Isak heard about the shooting of unarmed Michael Brown, he thought, "That could have been me."

When Jamar Clark was killed in Minneapolis, the injustice really hit home. It wasn't just "something to scroll past on Facebook." Isak got involved in Black Lives Matter. He went to the 4th Precinct every other day, sharing the anger and pain of people who live on the north side.

Isak's mother is afraid he will be killed because of his color—at a protest, being stopped by the police or being mistaken for a gang member. And he is afraid, too. As all black people in this country, he would like to be safe.

A very articulate young man, Isak suggested that the way to alter the national narrative is through the use of statistics—by getting correct information out there. His emphasis is what

pushed me to seek out the false images that have been disseminated in the culture to cement white supremacy in place.

Is there an end in sight?

There's no doubt that the national white supremacist narrative has undermined the health and well-being of non-white groups in this country. While we do need a lot more correct information, the other part of the solution might be a change in values.

Our nation needs to make official statements of lament for practicing slavery in this country and for the thousands of broken treaties. And going further than repenting of historical acts, the fact that slavery is evil should be officially acknowledged publicly, and the fact that the destruction of indigenous cultures is evil should also be acknowledged publicly. It should be acknowledged publicly that the perpetuation of ongoing white supremacy is just plain wrong. In addition, official statements of gratitude and appreciation for the part of our economy built by enslaved people need to be spoken. Appreciation for the tenacious regard for and protection of the natural world that Native people have practiced must be spoken. Words are not enough, of course; ideally, an attitude of lament and appreciation would run throughout the country. And if such attitudes were converted into the abolition of the metabolic-level existence of white supremacy, and consequently justice and fairness (no redlining, for example; return of land, for example) and equal opportunity would prevail, then we might get somewhere. I think there's a long road ahead.

Hopefully a change in the perception of African Americans in the national consciousness will come about since the opening, on Sept. 24, 2016, of the National Museum of African American History and Culture. From its initial conception in 1915 to its establishment in 2003, it will be the 19th museum in the Smithsonian Institution next to the Washington Monument and will feature layers of galleries focused on slavery, segregation and the civil rights movement as well as African-American achievement in music, entertainment, sports and politics.

The latest book by social justice evangelical leader Jim Wallis, "America's Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America," provides the statistics Isak is talking about—the information that could change the way people think, and could possibly change their values.

People's values need to change in order for information to have an impact, and, actually, I don't know what makes people change their values. I read most of Wallis' new book. It says some beautiful, theological things that would almost make people want to be Christian. He defines the problem that we have: "The unspoken but everyday assumption is that America is still a white society and that it has minorities who have problems in regard to race."

We have overt systemic racism in housing, money lending and access to opportunities, but the law, when it is on the side of civil rights, could address those things. What the law can't do is change hearts and minds. Conservative columnist David Brooks describes the extent of the problem: "The serious discrimination is implicit, subtle and nearly universal."

Wallis writes, “Whiteness is an idol of lies, arrogance, and violence. This idol blinds us to our true identity as the children of God …” So what he’s saying is that it is inner transformation that is ultimately necessary to overcome racism and white supremacy. He says we need to listen and learn. I’m trying.

If there were a God, whose essence was love, then all people of all ethnicities would be equally valuable in the eyes of this God. And this God would have sent Jesus to show people how to live on this earth together in harmony without any one group having power over any other group.

Merry Christmas, anybody?