

LISTENING FOR THE SONG OF THE DOVE

Bethel Camp Writers' Retreat

WRITTEN & COMPILED BY **VICKI SAIRS**

Many *Beacon* readers know and love Bethel Camp in a different way than I do. My only contact with the place itself is through the Bethel Camp Writers' Network, a motley crew of people who love to write and want to get better at it.

The brainchild of Ruthie Voth, Jason Ropp and Andrew Sharp, the Network just sponsored its second annual retreat October 2-4, 2015.

I love this group of people and am now a big fan of the camp itself. I'm not sure how this place manages to be so welcoming. It is, after all, a group of mostly older buildings, perched on a wooded hillside in Kentucky and overlooking an unpredictable river. You look up for the sky, but what you see are trees and steep slopes looming all around.

It's not threatening, exactly. I would call it protective, which makes it a perfect place for writers to gather and be vulnerable, neurotic and productive.

Here's what that productivity looked like at this year's retreat: we ate together (wonderful food, nothing like what you picture at a camp!); we attended workshops (sounds formal, but we just gathered in a room with lots of couches and learned from a guest speaker); we critiqued each other's work (gently, constructively, honestly); we stayed up late talking; and we wrote.

Michael Kelly Blanchard, a writer and musician, led the workshops, helping us see our task as writers in new

ways. On Friday night, he talked about listening to the doves in his yard in the morning. One dove calls out and sings half a song, then, after a pause, another responds from some unseen tree. If he waits long enough, he will see those two doves come together, meeting each other on the railing of the fence.

They are like lovers, he said, listening for each other until they find each other. "No one knew my song . . . you finished my song." That's what we do with our writing, he explained. We listen for a song; we return a song. We sing a true song to our readers, and we wait, hoping someone responds.

Michael also used the illustration of John the Baptist leaping in Elizabeth's womb when Mary arrives. Something in us leaps in the presence of "truth in the room," he said. Apprehending that truth and being able to write about it in a way that draws readers to our song and helps "complete their song"—that's what writers do.

We were fortunate to see Michael in action at a concert for the community in Bethel Camp's new chapel on Saturday night. So that you can see us in action, I'd like to share excerpts from some of the work we shared.



RUTHIE VOTH

Ruthie Voth breathes and works and writes at Bethel Camp in Clayhole, Kentucky. She and her husband are raising four children who accidentally remind her daily to savor every possible minute with them before they grow up and leave her dreaming of grandchildren. She would like to apologize for writing sappy love poems about her husband, but . . . today is not that day. Enjoy!

colossians three eighteen

if you were a planet,
you'd be a warm planet—
friendly and green.
life of all kinds
would flourish within your
welcoming atmosphere.

and i,
i would be your solitary moon;
content to orbit around you,
held close by your gravitational pull
ordering your days,
aligning myself to your every move,
making your nights
beautiful

on the darkest and loneliest of evenings,
clouds come between us—
the separation is temporary but bleak

i find comfort in knowing
that as i revolve around you,
you are pulling me in
an orbit of your own
—our own—
faithfully circling,
centering our lives around
the light that keeps you warm,
light that i reflect and direct
at you in your darker hours

serenity
—even at midnight.

ANDREW SHARP

“Gunpowder Trails” is an unfinished book by Andrew Sharp that follows the story of a slave, Charles, as he tries to survive with his master, the leader of a beleaguered gang of smugglers who live on the East Coast of the U.S. hundreds of years after the collapse of modern society. It is being published in serial format on the website of The Sacred Cow, sacredcowmagazine.com.



Gunpowder Trails

A band of travelers picked its way over the stones down the mountainside toward the lower hills and the river valley beyond. If humans still knew how to fly, a pilot looking down would have had a hard time picking out the line of travelers in brown fringed deerskin. From above, they were only a flicker of movement through the canopy of spreading branches that blanketed the mountains.

These particular travelers were a group of smugglers. In a few centuries, these smugglers would lose their weary droop. Their flea-infested beards would appear dashing, their bad manners be transformed into free-spirited revelry, and the greed that drove them become bravery. Their unwashed stink would be long ago washed away by time. These newly anointed merry men would defy oppressive rulers and become the heroes of song. But as the slave Charles trudged down the mountain trail, he was surrounded by smugglers who were very present day and only a few feet away. He was not inclined to frame them in song.

These heroes were surly, with blisters and aching joints, reeking of campfire smoke and sweat and life on the trail, and complaining about the mosquitoes whining in their ears.

Andrew Sharp lives with his wife Stephanie and two well-behaved young sons in Greenwood, Delaware. He works as an editor at a small newspaper in Easton, Maryland, and also writes fiction in the long peaceful interludes while his children are playing happily. He is currently attempting to write the Next Great American Third Chapter.



TAMARA DUNCAN SHOEMAKER

Tamara says: My grandmother had Alzheimer's for years, and I remember watching her change from an organized, put-together woman who dotted all her i's and crossed all her t's to a confused, disoriented lady who couldn't remember who I was. Her mind was trapped in this horrible disease, and the sadness of watching it wrap her up shredded our family's emotions. In spite of all this, we knew her deep faith in God.

When I wrote this story, the picture that inspired me was one of a waterfall, and the only thing I could think was: Even in the darkness, she held on to hope.

The Lighthouse

I stand at the precipice as the light flashes across the sweeping currents. Oceans of emptiness, misty ridges, and forests of oblivion blend into one mass that shakes my inner core, spidering fault lines through my foundation.

Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls. All your waves and breakers have swept over me.

Mom, you left the door open last night. The whispers plague me. Doctor visits, the dreaded diagnoses. She'll need a full-time caretaker, you know.

I study the wrinkles that crease the back of my hand, the age spots that dot the surface. I *do* remember the whisper of cherubic lips on my cheek, pudgy fingers offering dandelion bouquets.

I don't understand why I can't find my children. I search the panorama, but they're hidden in the mists.

Deep calls to deep...

Only one thing remains constant—the light in the mists of oblivion. *All your waves and breakers have swept over me.*

I close my eyes and step over the precipice. Tumbling, flying, falling, I hit the emptiness, the ebb, the pull of current. The world says I am lost; I've forgotten and will be forgotten.

I wipe the tears from my eyes and swim toward your light where home lies beyond.

Tamara Shoemaker lives in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia with her husband, three children, a few jars of Nutella, and a never-ending carafe of coffee. She authored the Amazon best-selling Shadows in the Nursery Christian mystery series and Soul Survivor, another Christian mystery. Her fantasy books include the beginning of the Heart of a Dragon trilogy: Kindle the Flame, as well as the upcoming Guardian of the Vale trilogy. Follow her on social media – Twitter: @TamaraShoemaker; Website: tamarashoemaker.org; Facebook: facebook.com/tshoebbooks.



SARAH STOLTZFUS ALLEN

Sarah Stoltzfus Allen is a wife and mother living in eastern KY. She reads, writes, and drinks coffee while trying to live her life as Christ-like as possible. She says: "This is a series of poems about the weekend we buried my grandpa, Wesley."

i. monday evening viewing

pretty in pink
and a long purple skirt
silver white hair pulled
tight and fixed just
so

she cried only when
emotion threatened
and that happened
more than once

a beautiful woman
in an ugly world
left to face it
with only memories
of a once strong man

and a savior
who loves more
deeply
purely
than her husband
now with that same
savior

ii. tuesday afternoon procession

a decent, decent man
hard, chiseled construction
site and everyone keeps working
except him, hardhat over his heart
from behind tinted windows
and beside my grandma
i make eye contact

a decent, decent man
for a second i wish i was him

but maybe he's been
in the same seat as me
only worse, and i couldn't
bear that
my grandma sees him
and tears come
as we silently climb the hill
the second car in the procession

iii. tuesday afternoon bedtime

we cry
and sing
and shovel dirt
mixing traditions
southeastern ky
and
conservative, mennonite
each taking a turn at
tucking him in-
to the southeastern hills
we let ourselves
cry and
sing traditional hymns
in four part
harmony
as each mennonite
shovels on the
blanket
of dirt
and realizes
it's okay
to cry



PHYLLIS SWARTZ

This is the third chapter of Phyllis's memoir about her learning and teaching. "My first chapter is about the beginning of my schooling with Mennonite and Amish schoolmates at Yoder School

in Grantsville, Maryland. My second chapter is about the transition to an elementary school in Flint, Michigan. This chapter is about junior high, also in Flint, Michigan." Names have been changed in this piece.

T.N. Lamb, Junior High School

I was right about my childhood being over. I could tell because my very first year at T.N. Lamb, Junior High School, Lila Johns got pregnant and Tara Foster committed suicide. The news about Lila seeped out with rumors

and looks and nods. Nobody knew her boyfriend, which confused us. The more people whispered, the lower Lila's head hung and the sadder she looked. Then one day Lila didn't come to school, and we never saw her again. Her parents sent her to a home for unwed girls, we decided.

The news about Tara exploded on the very day it happened. Just the day before, Tara's boyfriend Jason had broken up with her, said he didn't want to be her boyfriend ever again. Jason did this just after fifth period, so we all knew Tara was upset. She had spent the rest of the afternoon wadding up tissues, her face swollen from crying. Jason didn't care. Jason's breaking up made no sense to us, not with how besotted he had been with her bouncy blonde ponytail and her cheerleader figure. And she was nice. Tara always had a smile for everyone—even Eleanor and Isador Newton, identical twins who everyone taunted for being albino. So what ailed Jason was beyond us.

The next morning at school Tara wasn't any better. She wouldn't talk with anyone and cried with her head on her books during class. She killed herself right after school before her mother came home from work. She found her dad's loaded gun, took it into her bedroom and shot herself in the head. Then she crawled for help into the kitchen. When her mother came home, she found Tara there on the kitchen floor with a hole in her head. The rumor around school was that Tara's brains were seeping from the hole.

Lots of us went to the funeral. We had to get signed notes from our parents, giving us permission to go. I rode in a car with Sheila Howe and Patricia Timmons. Patricia's mom drove us. I wished I hadn't gone. Tara's funeral wasn't like any of the Mennonite funerals I had ever attended. At those funerals, people cried softly and tried to stop. Tara's mother wailed. Two men walked on either side of Tara's grandma as she staggered up the aisle. They caught her each time her legs buckled. She cried out with her mouth wide open, gasping for air. No one could listen to the minister for the moaning and crying. At the grave, Tara's mom tried to keep the cemetery workers from lowering Tara's casket.

The next day at school felt eerie. Never had everyone been so quiet. People didn't even look at each other much. Jason was absent, and no one knew where he was. The teachers were nicer than usual. So were the kids.

About Phyllis: Retired after thirty years of full-time teaching, I now write, work on a few other projects, teach occasionally at Rosedale Bible College, travel with my husband Steve, who is the conference pastor, and find time for my grandchildren. What I learned teaching in a middle school, a prison, a gifted program, in parent education, and in the church informs what I do now.

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the rectory of St. Stephen's Catholic Church, Croghan. In the early years, he worked at Climax Manufacturing in Castorland, and also worked alongside his father in his father's meat cutting business. Farming was his lifelong passion. Together with his wife, the couple owned and operated a dairy farm on Route 126, Castorland, since 1956.

Mr. Widrick is survived by seven children and their spouses, Linda S. and Kevin Myers, Kim D. and Linda Widrick, Julie A. and Dennis Tooker, Jeanette K. and Victor Tripp, all of Castorland, Kay D. and Jeffrey Saber of Carthage, Carolyn J. and John Schneider of Aylett, Virginia, Daniel J. and Mary Widrick of Castorland; four brothers and three sisters-in-law, Herbert Widrick of Carthage, Darius and Mary Widrick of Castorland, Duane and Georgianna Widrick of Castorland, Clyde and Janie Widrick of Castorland; a sister and brother-in-law, Charlotte and John Frese of Clayton; seventeen grandchildren, nineteen great-grandchildren, several nieces, nephews and cousins.

He is predeceased by his wife Jacqueline Halladay Widrick, who died on August 16, 2003; a brother and two sisters-in-law, Clarence and Beulah Widrick, and Shirley Widrick.

Mr. Widrick was baptized in the Croghan Mennonite Church and loved his large family. His interests included bowling, playing cards, picking apples and blackberries, fishing, gardening and attending farm auctions.

The funeral was held October 24, 2015 at Naumburg Mennonite Church with pastors Titus Mast and Myron Roggie officiating. Burial was in Union Cemetery, Naumburg.

Alayna Anne Yoder, infant daughter of Dean and Abigail (Eash) Yoder of LaGrange, Indiana

died November 5, 2015. She was born October 13, 2015. In addition to her parents, Alayna is survived by grandparents Mel and Charlotte Eash, Daniel and Susie Yoder; maternal great-grandparents, Steve and Carolyn Overholt, all of Topeka; and several aunts, uncles and cousins.

Olen J. Yoder (92) of Grantsville, Maryland, died November 11, 2015, at WMHS Regional Medical Center, Cumberland, Maryland. Born March 14, 1923, in Somerset County, Pennsylvania, he was the son of the late John and Lydia (Tice) Yoder. He was preceded in death by his wife Viola (Yoder) Yoder; five brothers Roy, Cloyd, Raymond, Daniel, and John Yoder, Jr.; and two sisters Iva Lantz and Verda Mast.

Olen was a self-employed artificial inseminator with Curtis Breeding Service. He was a McNess sales representative, and member of Cherry Glade Mennonite Church.

Surviving are seven sons Duane (Earleen Beckman) Yoder, Swanton; Oren (Wendy) Yoder, Mountain Lake Park; Merv (Brenda) Yoder, Bedford, Pennsylvania; Gary Yoder, Grantsville; Weldon "Woody" (Ann) Yoder, Moundsville, West Virginia; Lowell (Debbra) Yoder, Frederick; and Bradley (Troya) Yoder, Birmingham, Alabama; two brothers Marvin Yoder, Springs, Pennsylvania; Monroe Yoder, Bronx, New York; two sisters Lois Stutzman, West Salem, Ohio; Dorothy Yoder, Grantsville; ten grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren.

A funeral service was held November 15, 2015 at Cherry Glade Mennonite Church with Pastor Barry Maust and Pastor Danny Tice officiating. Burial was in the Cherry Glade Cemetery.

Listening for the Song of the Dove, continued....

Phyllis, on the first and second Bethel Camp Writer's Retreats:

I left the first retreat [October 2014] in despair, not sure I could even begin writing, feeling I had no voice. But that retreat brought me to a decision point—would I begin or would I not? And I did.

I left the second retreat encouraged and equipped. And I continue to write.

From Jason Ropp: You can find Jason's work by visiting his blog at Jasonropp.com or going to *The Sacred Cow* at sacredcowmagazine.com. His music is on iTunes, Spotify, and other digital stores. Check under Jason Ropp or The White Oaks.

A slightly edited version of the beginning of this piece ("Listening for the Voice of the Dove") appeared in the Christmas 2015 edition of the Bethel Camp Times.

BAPTISMS AND/OR NEW MEMBERS

Bethel Mennonite Church, Sarasota, Florida: Doug Hamilton, Julie Hamilton, Diana Kurtz, Sarah Ann Miller (L), Annabelle Hamilton, Audrey Hamilton, Fred, Anna, and Kayla Martin, Charmaine Miller, Laura Miller, Leon Mullet, Ryan and Mollie Schloneger, Vanessa Sommers (C)

Greenwood Mennonite Church, Greenwood, Delaware: Camilla Bender, Dorie Mast, Laci Mast, Allison Swartzentruber, Owen Swartzentruber (B)

Townline Mennonite Church, Shipshewana, Indiana: Jalen Cordell Yoder (B)

Turners Creek Mennonite Church, Jackson, Kentucky: David Hall, Roxanne Hall (C)

UPCOMING EVENTS

Annual Pastors Conference
February 15-18, 2016
Light-in-the-Valley Chapel, Sugarcreek, Ohio

Annual Conference 2016
August 4-7, 2016
Greenwood, Delaware

Rosedale Bible College
Irwin, Ohio

Winter Term
January 4 – February 12, 2016

Spring Semester
February 22 – May 21, 2016

