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REVIEW: *ORDINARY MIRACLES: AWAKENING TO THE HOLY WORK OF PARENTING, A MEMOIR WITH PICTURES*, AND *WHEN THE ROLL IS CALLED A PYONDER: TALES FROM A MENNONITE CHILDHOOD*

Melanie Springer Mock

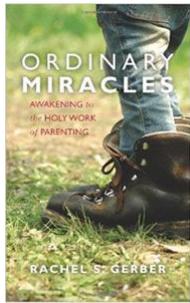
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BOOK MATTER

Rachel Gerber. *Ordinary Miracles: Awakening to the Holy Work of Parenting*. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2014. Kindle.

Ruth, John. *Branch: A Memoir with Pictures*. Ephrata, PA: Grace Press, 2013.

Zimmerman, Diana R. *When The Roll is Called a Pyonder: Tales from a Mennonite Childhood*. Little Elm, TX: eLectio Publishing, 2014.



Ordinary Miracles: Awakening to the Holy Work of Parenting by Rachel Gerber

Perhaps the most powerful first-person story shared by a Mennonite in the past year has yet to appear in traditional print. It was instead publishing on a blog with a fairly modest following on Facebook. And yet, Sharon Detweiler's January 9 story, posted on the **Our Stories Untold** site, produced considerable discussion, both on the site itself and in other Mennonite-related venues. "John Howard Yoder: My Untold Story After Sixty Years of Silence" narrates Detweiler's experiences with Yoder, her attempts to report his sexual abuse, and the ways Mennonite leadership failed to hear her story. After years of silence, Detweiler writes that she is compelled to share her suffering so that others who likewise faced abuse—from Yoder or others—may know they are not alone.

Detweiler's courage in telling her own story will, no doubt, open others to do the same. Indeed, on Rachel Halder's *Our Stories Untold* site and elsewhere online, more and more writers claiming a Mennonite identity are finding their voices, using the internet as the primary means through which they tell their life stories and, in the process, are creating community with other readers who might resonate with their experiences. ⁽¹⁾

Any consideration of Mennonite memoirs published in the past year must acknowledge this subtle yet important shift in Mennonite letters. As more and more Mennonites turn to the memoir to share their life stories, we should recognize that the internet has facilitated this shift, exposing more readers to Mennonite writing and also providing another conduit for Mennonite self-expression that is more immediate, and often more vulnerable, than what has appeared in the past. More vulnerable, but also more experimental. The Mennonite memoirs published in late 2013 and 2014 reflect a move toward more innovative storytelling, as authors eschewed straightforward narratives for different forms that nonetheless convey what having a Mennonite identity has meant to the writers.

It will be interesting to observe how many of these writers now working in the blog medium will also guide their work into book-length projects, or whether their stories will remain told only in online settings. Some authors have already used their blogs as the foundation for a longer work, as Rachel Gerber has done: her **Everything Belongs** blog serves as the basis for *Ordinary Miracles: Awakening to the Holy Work of Parenting*, published in 2014 by Herald Press.

Gerber frames *Ordinary Miracles* around the story of Jesus on the Emmaus Road. Narratives about Gerber's parenting life with two small boys are interspersed with reflections on the Road to Emmaus story in Luke 24, when Jesus meets two tired followers walking along the road. Although they do not immediately recognize Jesus, they invite him into their home, and discover the person they thought was a stranger is someone else entirely. Shortly after their discovery, Jesus departs again.

Using the Emmaus Road as her guiding metaphor, Gerber successfully conveys the weariness and the exhilaration of parenting two boys. Even more, she expresses the wonder of meeting holiness in her everyday experiences: “The Emmaus story has been a guiding story to my own life,” Gerber writes. “As a parent I live the story of this road every day. Often, I live it multiple times. It’s the cycle between exasperation and utter elation . . . [Yet] I find myself surprised by the Divine in the midst of it all” (prologue).

At the heart of Gerber’s *Ordinary Miracles* is a story of loss and restoration, of finding Jesus even in the midst of great brokenness. She narrates the story of being in a horrible car wreck, her youngest miraculously protected by a car seat, her oldest safely at grandparents. Gerber considers how much she nearly lost in the accident, how much others lost, the nature of a God who allows some to live unscathed, and others to receive grave wounds. And when, two days after the accident, her mother-in-law is diagnosed with stage four cancer, these questions intensify, as she wonders where God is “in this broken mess” (ch. 6).

As throughout the book, this story of loss and brokenness is followed by a reflection on the Emmaus Road, the discovery by the disciples that the One they thought they’d lost, Jesus, is the stranger communing with them; that God is with us, even when we do not see or feel God there; and that Jesus stands beside us in our brokenness, for He was broken, too.

Using the Emmaus story as a framing device provides Gerber’s book with a compelling perspective that might be lacking in other memoirs on parenting and spirituality. For in complementing her own story with this meditation on Emmaus, we see more clearly both the meaning of the account in Luke 24, as well as understanding more profoundly Gerber’s experiences as a parent encountering the potential loss of her life and that of her infant son, and the very real loss of her mother-in-law. Both stories remind us, too, that God stands in that loss, even when we might question God’s very presence among us.

This occurs again and again throughout *Ordinary Miracles*. Gerber narrates a story from her life with two boys—some funny, some somber, all relatable—and then couples the parenting narratives with the Luke passage, continually unwinding scripture for us, allowing us to see both scripture and parenting in an entirely new way. In doing this, Gerber reminds readers that our stories are intertwined with The Story, and that the ordinariness of our lives reflect Jesus’ presence among us, just as clearly as did Jesus’s journey with strangers on the Emmaus Road.

Like *Ordinary Miracles*, the memoir by John L. Ruth is also episodic. Rather than providing a straightforward narrative, Ruth tells his life story through snapshots both literal and figurative. Ruth’s book, *Branch: A Memoir in Pictures*, provides 210 short snippets from Ruth’s life, each accompanied by a photograph taken either by Ruth or his father, or—less often—by other people and organizations credited in the photo captions. *Branch* is beautifully constructed, both in terms of its images but also in terms of the stories Ruth chooses to tell and the narrations themselves.

The opening pages of *Branch* suggest the tact Ruth will take throughout the book, offering us stories both up-close and personal while also providing a longer view. The first image and narrative is of Ruth at two, on the stoop of his parents’ farmhouse; the second is an aerial shot of the farm and its environs, with a description of its roots as Lenape land, “bought” by Quaker settlers, and then sold to Ruth’s ancestor, a Palatine Mennonite immigrant (4). These initial pages lay the foundation for what will follow, as Ruth’s story is intertwined with the land, situated near the branch of two rivers and a part of his family for 122 years; the history of a people, both in the United States and in Europe, where Ruth travels often in his quest to understand Mennonite history; and with the ways contemporary culture has challenges us to set deep roots on the homeland, however defined, while also branching out, perhaps even to the ends of the earth.

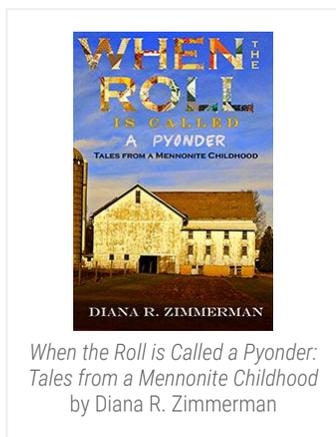
Throughout *Branch*, then, Ruth provides stories about his own upbringing on the farm, followed by his matriculation at Harvard, his call into the ministry, his work as a college professor, his roles as a Mennonite



leader, his growing family, and his return to the family homestead. These stories and images are braided with those that focus more broadly on happenings within the Mennonite church: conferences Ruth attended, committees on which he served, shifts in congregational activity. And with images of landscapes that changed with time's passing, as cars and Amish buggies increasingly shared the same roads, the land slowly assumed difference shape, and Ruth's family farm and home were transformed.

Some readers—and I count myself among them—will find Ruth's personal stories more interesting than those more focused on conference meetings and the machinations of church leaders, endeavoring to make decisions significant for the church's future. Ruth's childhood and his development into a young scholar is especially interesting, given what might be seen as the limitations of a conservative Mennonite culture, where even an old Gramophone seemed a fascination. As the memoir progresses, we see Ruth date and marry, have children and then grandchildren, relate his personal stories of discovery and conflict. He is unflinching in sharing images that show life's sorrows and its joys. For example, Ruth's reflection on his father's death at age 101, and an accompanying photo of his grandchildren, singing hymns to a bed-ridden man, powerfully presents a motif at the heart of *Branch*: the transmission of faith from one generation to the next and the significant continuity of tradition, deeply rooted in the homestead where Ruth had himself been raised.

Readers will also find value in what Ruth has to say about Mennonite history and about his work as a minister and then bishop within the Franconia Conference, as well his travels abroad. As a well-known Mennonite historian, Ruth understands the importance of personal stories in constructing a broader narrative of a time and a people; and he also understands the significance of faith communities in shaping the personal story he tells. Of the life-writing genre in general, he says "A memoir results from the ordinary human desire to leave something on record, in my case a thanks and a witness" (1). In *Branch*, Ruth compellingly provides both thanks for a life well lived, as well as bearing witness to the vibrant Mennonite communities with whom he interacted. Not only a pleasurable read, then, *Branch* is a valuable historical document, providing a new way of telling the Mennonites' story.



Diana R. Zimmerman also chooses a different approach to storytelling in *When the Roll is Called a Pyonder: Tales from a Mennonite Childhood*. Zimmerman's book focuses exclusively on her childhood in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, and is written from a child's perspective. The memoir is also episodic, with each memory assuming, at most, five or six paragraphs. The result of this kind of narrative approach is interesting, as Zimmerman is replicating not only a child's voice but also her thought pattern—a child would not think in complete, connected thoughts after all, and would not make transitions between experiences that seem, from her view, to have little connection to other events.

The memoir's forward orients the reader toward Zimmerman's approach, where she briefly addresses the timespan covered by the memoir's 200 pages: she begins where her "first hazy memories dawn" and continues until "the day my mother gives me the thin red notebook that will become my first diary, a day between my 10th birthday and the start of spring" (1). Given the vagaries of memory—and especially a child's memory—what Zimmerman writes is "an indecipherable mix of the real and the imagined" (1).

What is definitely real, and what definitely imagined, is left for the reader to decide. As we move from moment to moment, we become increasingly aware of what matters most in Zimmerman's young life: her parents definitely, especially her mother, around whom many of the stories turn; and her sisters, including Kelly, with whom she has a complicated relationship every sibling can appreciate; but also her church, where she learns the rhythms and rituals of her Mennonite congregation, which includes looking for the Candy Lady after service, sitting appropriately in a dress, and affirming that she loves Jesus, even if she's not old enough to make a public proclamation.

Zimmerman's voice remains compelling throughout her book, even as it makes subtle shifts reflecting time's passing. By the memoir's end, it's clear that she has matured, her naive understanding about life slowly being transformed by age and experience. She also develops an awareness about life beyond the boundaries of her farm, her circle broadening to include not only her immediate family and grandparents and church, but also school, friends, the media, and even impending danger like the potential meltdown at Three Mile Island. Her growing consciousness begins to recognize the complexity of good and evil, right and wrong, as well as what should remain a secret, and what stories she feels comfortable telling.

In her forward, Zimmerman writes "Mennonite tradition emphasizes the importance of being 'different from the (rest of the world)' and from the time of my earliest memories, I have been aware, on some level, of a split between 'us' (the Mennonites) and 'them' (everyone else)" (1). Her memoir does an excellent job of showing us what that separation must feel like to a young person, trying to understand what it means to be in, but not of, the world. Additionally, like Ruth's *Branch*, Zimmerman's memoir allows us to see how one's personal life can reflect and illuminate cultural contexts; we get a clear sense of what it must have been like to grow up Mennonite in Lancaster County, where the separation between "us" and "everyone else" is carried distinctly into even what one might call her food.

Certainly Zimmerman's episodic approach to storytelling will not appeal to every reader. But her willingness to rely on alternative narrative devices—to take risks with voice, time, perspective, and the blurred line between real and imagined memory—is nonetheless refreshing, as it reflects the desire of contemporary Mennonite writers to use experimental forms of expression, even in life writing, a genre that has often been reserved for more traditional, chronological narrative approaches. Like the other memoirs reviewed here, though—and, indeed, like the mass of Mennonite life stories now being told through electronic means—Zimmerman's text reflects both her personal story and the historical, social, religious context that informed its making. And these are, in any form, the stories that need to be heard—and told.