

My life has come nearly full circle. I grew up on a farm near Spring City in Chester County, and now in this period of my life I am back in PA, living in a house located several houses from my immigrant Huber ancestor's original farm. And I am part of a church where my father was one of the revival meeting speakers when I was young.

I was born the middle child of seven (living) children to Norman and Irene Souder Bechtel, six girls and one boy. I enjoyed growing up on a farm, even with all the work. The Mennonite community felt secure where we were related to nearly everyone. I was one of the original students at the new church grade school, started partly over the compulsory daily flag salute in the public schools.

The George Brunk tent meetings were the opportunity for my 9 year old public confession to "lose my sins and find my Savior," as many of us said on the platform in front of thousands of people. This became the first of many decisions my sensitive conscience would make. Soon after this we changed churches after my dad was ordained to pastor the Mennonite church in Pottstown.

High school at Christopher Dock was a struggle to fit in where the pressure felt greater than in our little Vincent community. After high school and a year serving as a maid for knitting mill owners, I went to EMC to major in Home Economics Ed to become a teacher, my childhood dream.

I thrived in college, finding myself, making new friends, finding joy in serving at a "Y" church in the mountains with our team of students, taking bag lunches with us on Sundays so we could visit mountain folks after lunch, finding dreams for the rest of my life, falling in love, losing love, finding it again. Jesus became personal for me. The entire world opened up as I became more aware of injustice and inequalities.

My first teaching job was in WVA where I shared an apartment with a friend, another new teacher. It was a learning/growing experience working with coal miners' daughters, teaching subjects I wasn't trained for, leading singing in the small church I attended, and preparing for my wedding the following June. My new husband, Henry Shank, and I began our married life together in Greenwood, DE, where we both taught at the Mennonite School, making many new friends and memories.

We moved to VA where Henry was a student at Eastern Mennonite Seminary and I taught Home Economics at Eastern Mennonite HS. Our first child, Kristin, was born there. After one year Henry continued seminary in IN at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary and I became house mother to a family whose Mother had been brutally killed that spring. This was an extremely difficult time for me. Out of this experience, we helped begin Fellowship of Hope, an intentional house church community. We became family to each other, mutually caring for one another, although the struggle to be faithful disciples was not without problems.

After two years at the seminary where I also took some classes, we moved to Kidron, OH, where Henry taught at Central Christian HS and before long I was full time mom to Kristin, Karl and Michael.

Small groups were an essential part of my life over the years~young moms with our children, women of mixed generations, small groups with couples~~sharing concerns, praying for each other, eating together and camping together. I valued the friendships formed in the small groups.

We lived on a mini farm, growing most of the food we ate, raising chickens, goats, sheep, ducks, rabbits, puppies, a pony and a horse, but not all at the same time! Summers were family times working, sweating, caring for animals and garden with some time to play, fish and get up late at night to see the meteor showers.

When our youngest was 3, Henry had a physical collapse which took him to the Cleveland Clinic where they discovered he had a heart condition that could not be treated. This was extremely devastating. The doctors said to go home and "live the best you can for the 6 months to 15 years you may have left." Immediately I latched on to the 15 years, or perhaps complete healing.

Henry could no longer teach a full day, so his teaching career ended. He was able to do some writing for the Mennonite church press and did some part time interim pastoring as his strength permitted. I picked up some substitute teaching, some part time work at a children's day care and later at a fabric store and still ran the household.

People tried to get us to go to healing services. We went to one and that was enough. Others tried to get us to go to Canada for special treatment, or CA, or try this or that remedy. We felt it was important to carry on our family life together in Kidron and not move to some distant place for an "iffy" solution. We were in a small group that prayed for healing, as did many other friends. It was a very hard time for the children at their young ages to have a dad who was weak and often cold, and who couldn't do the normal things dads do. But he was able to go fishing at the neighbors' pond, or bird watching in the nearby woods with the family, special times.

When he had a stroke and 6 1/2 years after diagnosis, died suddenly, shortly after his 40th birthday, we were devastated. We had believed God would heal on this earth. I went through a dark night of the soul. Others' easy answers (God's will, etc), were not working for me. People said I was strong; I wanted to be weak with someone. It was finally when reading Madeleine L'Engle The Irrational Season that I began to experience mystery, God's mystery, and that God is the God of the unanswerables. I may not know the whys, but I learned to live with that. I also learned that others' prayers for me carried me through the dark night when I could hardly pray.

Before Henry died, we became involved in Choice Books as co-supervisors, he doing the office work, I going on the road. It also gave the chance for the children to be involved in jobs. I was supervisor for 13 years of the Ohio Choice Books program.

A couple years after Henry died, I went back to grad school to get my counseling degree. It took 5 1/2 years going part time since I was working full time to support the family, sending Kris off to college, and going to as many of my sons' basketball games as I could. Life was a struggle. The church tried to help but wasn't there for a fatherless family as much as we needed.

During this time I was invited to be part of an interchurch small group that was so supportive. We could talk, pray, play and camp together.

After I got my counseling degree and began to practice, I felt like I had come home to the job that was right for me. This was the calling I had felt, to bind up the wounded and to heal the brokenhearted. I worked full time at counseling 10 years in OH and then part time when we moved to PA in 2003, working with primarily women and often women from the Plain community in Lancaster County. It has become my way to offer hope to those needing hope.

The year I finally had my counseling license under my belt, the time was right to meet Lowell Gerber. Actually, we had begun informal conversations related to church and life and enjoyed those times together. So we continued the conversations that haven't ended! I also gained more family with Lowell's brother and wife, their two sons who now have wives and children, and his many cousins and families.

About that time my best friend and I were talking more about dreams and what meaning they have for us. She helped me see meaning in some of my recurrent dreams, helped me to better listen to the messages of my dreams. A couple weeks ago, while visiting Linda in VT, we talked again about her gift to me in hearing my dreams and how I've used that with my clients to their benefit as well. She was grateful. Her husband said that just before she died on May 10, as she was unconscious, he could tell she was still doing some dream work.

Lowell and I grew in our relationship and after getting the approval of my three children, we married on March 1, 1997. It was a joyful day with our family and friends. Lowell and I lived in Kidron our first six years together, Lowell working as chaplain and interim pastor and I working full time as a counselor. We moved to PA in 2003 when Lowell accepted the pastorate of Lititz Mennonite Church.

Travel has been an important part of our life together. On our vacations we visited British Columbia where Lowell had lived and pastored. We visited my brother and family in OR and traveled down the coast to see the majestic Redwoods. We went to ID to a church

anniversary where Lowell had pastored, visiting Yellowstone Park and the Grand Tetons. A memorable time was our trip to visit our friends and their work in Argentina, visiting the Chaco Mennonites, believers in Argentina barrios and the beautiful Iguazu Falls.

Family has always been strong for us. Kristin, a full time homemaker, her husband Kirk, a stone mason, and their two girls, Abigail and Sophia live in Harrisonburg, VA. A favorite tradition is taking the granddaughters to Cape May a few days each summer, especially since the ocean has been one of my favorite places most of my life.

Karl also lives and works in Harrisonburg, carrying on my and my Mother's legacy of love of plants and trees as a landscape designer. Michael lives and works in Washington, DC as communication director/senior policy adviser for a congressman, inserting principles of peacemaking wherever possible.

Service was always important to me, including a summer of service for my children and me at Spruce Lake Retreat after Henry died, a week of Mennonite Disaster Service in SC with our small group, volunteer work at Ten Thousand Villages and Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society, a family tradition of volunteer time at Material Resource Center over our Christmases together. During the two months following our ending at Lititz Mennonite Church, we were assistant hosts at the International Guest House in DC, a wonderful international experience, even with doing laundry and cleaning bathrooms!

Some of my favorite things to do include those things my Mother passed on--love of planting and nurturing flowers, trees and garden, interest in the global church through reading missionary books as a child, good food, good books, good music. Even to her last days two months ago she tried to sing with me. Music has always been an important part of my growing up years and with my own family. In music I can be comforted, energized or find healing. Finding my family connection through genealogy has been increasingly fascinating, especially since coming back to PA.

One of my learning curves in this stage of life is learning to live with loss. In the last four years my Mother, brother and youngest sister completed their earthly journey, plus two uncles, an aunt, one niece and another niece a couple years earlier, and a sister-in-law. Just the last two months both my Mother and one of my best friends died. How do I live with and love what is? And the continued challenge of living with a body that has pain more often than it used to, limiting my activities. I find the support of caring friends to be invaluable. They are Jesus in flesh.

Over the years I have come to believe more and more that the purpose of Jesus coming to earth was to live among us and show us what God is like. To love and lift up the oppressed, to care for the homeless, the poor, the hungry. That is also our purpose in life, to live as Jesus lived. To bind up the wounded, to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim the good news of God's love.