

The Poet and the Wild City

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[I wish to begin by saying how happy I am to be here, to participate in this important and timely conversation about Mennonites and the City. I thank Roy Loewen for inviting me, and for beginning to include the new Mennonite writers and artists in Mennonite cultural scholarship.

I am fascinated by the dual origins of Mennonite culture proposed by this conference, one village peasant, the other urban intellectual. This makes sense to me, as the daughter of uneducated farmers who nevertheless considered themselves intellectually and culturally robust and equal to anyone, a fact I appreciate greatly living as I do now, in a predominantly working class and university town where the people who work with their hands are not the people who allow themselves to think or make music.]

A few years ago Kingston, Ontario writer Wayne Grady published a marvellous book entitled *Toronto the Wild* (Toronto: McFarlane, Walter and Ross, 1995). In Grady's portrait of Canada's largest most cosmopolitan city, the urban does not represent an escape from or conquest over nature and wild animals and plants and trees, but rather a haven for them. In Grady's Toronto, among and between streets and houses and cars and bridges and highrises and the lives of people, thrive raccoons and sparrows and seagulls and pigeons and bats and coyotes and rats and termites and snakes and starlings and cockroaches and mosquitoes and trees and grasses and wildflowers and weeds and rivers and lakes and beaches and ravines, each with their own independent species organizations, happily co-existing through the seasons on terms that are only partially sanctioned by their human neighbours.

When Roy Loewen and I were negotiating the title of this talk, "The Poet and the Wild City," this was the meaning of wild I had in my mind: I was thinking of the way the city appears in my poetry, mostly in the form of rivers and parks and trees and grass, only occasionally as bridges and libraries and highways and airports and sidewalks, and rarely, if ever, as office buildings or high rises or movie theatres or shopping centres or department stores or bars. I was thinking that in fact I experience the city, in a physical way, much as my beloved dog Maddie did, through our fondly remembered ten years together, the way my children did when they were very young, as grey blurs interspersed with living patches of sweet smelling, endlessly fascinating damp or wet or dry patches of earth, and grass and riverbanks and squirrels and cats and birds and earthworms and acorns and twigs and pebbles and snowflakes and puddles and mud and clouds and rain and sun. How I've spent all these years trying to adapt from my peasant prairie village farm upbringing to the life of the modern Canadian city, and how after all those major lifestyle revisions and years of intense culture shock and fielding so much criticism from my family and the Mennonite community for abandoning the culture, I haven't really gotten very far away from my sensuous childhood love of prairie silence and four leggeds and green places after all. I wanted to tell you this, after accepting Roy's generous invitation to speak to you about the leap between country and city in Canadian Mennonite experience, or how a village peasant farm girl like me became an urban poet. I mostly wish to confess that I'm still country in my imagination and my bones, that it takes a lot more than a couple of decades and a handful of books and university degrees to make the transition from a deeply rooted peasant life to a modern post-industrial urban one, as those of you who have attempted similar leaps will no doubt agree.

But then after Roy and I talked, I remembered that the word wild would surely carry another meaning for a Manitoba Mennonite audience, especially from those members fearing or perhaps desiring transgressive writing from their most scandalous literary daughter! The word wild, in this other, more traditional Mennonite, lexicon, I thought, would signify, or at least call up associations, as it also then did for me, from my conscientious and proper Mennonite upbringing, of disorderliness, lack of control, unsubmitiveness, wilfulness, stubborn resistance to reason, disobedience. Who of us, I thought, at least among those who grew up before television and the effective end of Mennonite cultural separatism, who of us does not remember the huge and sometimes desperate efforts our parents and grandparents undertook to wring these seemingly inherent, lurking qualities out of us, by hook or by crook, to use an expression of my mother's, that is, by seduction and teaching and violence? Not for any erratic or unsociable purpose but rather to replace them, dutifully and painstakingly, with their desired and respected opposites, which unlike qualities of wildness, apparently had to be instructed and learned, that is to say: orderliness, self control, submissiveness, yieldingness to the will of the group or its leaders, reasonableness, and obedience. Now I don't know how much you thought about this when you were being brought up and instructed in these proper Mennonite social behaviours, but I know I pondered this question a lot:

why it was that the behaviours considered essential to the making and sustaining of human community and goodness did not seem to come naturally to the human species, while the behaviours that seemed so undesirable flourished unbidden, like weeds, in us?

But after all the same was true for the cows, and the cats and dogs and pigs and the chickens, and the vegetables in our gardens and the wheat and barley in the fields, all of whom exhibited the same inclination toward waywardness: how was it that the good, submissive, reasonable behaviours of all these creatures required so much conscientious labour from humans and despite all our care they were always on the verge of ungratefully slipping out of the pasture, tearing down the pig barn, flying the coop, wandering off to join the lives of the wild foxes and gophers in their burrows and lairs, how was it that our neatly laid out pretty fields and gardens were constantly under threat of being overrun by pigweed and wild mustard and milkweed and thistles and dandelions and potato beetles and grasshoppers and blackbirds, who apparently, unlike us and our farms, needed no keepers or teachers and knew nothing of straight lines or submissiveness to the human collective good, and yet who seemed to be having a darn good time in their lawlessness, both individually and in groups, perhaps better, I couldn't help suspecting often, than we.

Indeed, there seemed to be two different and opposite ways of being in the world, one governed by externally imposed rules stemming from our fathers and the Bible and God, the other by unpredictable, uncontrollable energies inherent in every living thing. This dichotomy held right through the great chain of being, from the lowliest creatures to the angels: it wasn't as simple as a dichotomy of nature versus culture, as contemporary theorists have generally characterized the binary nature of Western thought, nor was it about individuality versus collectivity, or randomness versus order, since wildness could be found as easily in cultural settings as in natural ones, and certain groups of people were considered especially dangerous in these ways: pagan drum beating African tribes, say, or lipstick high heeled American women, or the shaggy haired irreverent Beatles who inspired hysteria in crowds of young people and scandalously claimed to rival Jesus Christ in popularity.

Cities in general were considered havens of wildness, in my village, not in Wayne Grady's sense of providing intentional or inadvertent refuge for bits of forest and wild animals and weeds, but in the sense of providing all kinds of avenues of escape from the eyes of the church and our own fathers. Cities challenged, in a direct way, Menno Simons' injunction to avoid daily association with unbelievers which was after all the cornerstone of the Mennonite practice of cultural separatism. Multiculturalism, plurality, relativism, fragmented notions of identity, transitory communities and relationships, aesthetic superficiality, addiction to novelty, discontinuity, transience, mobility, intense momentary pleasures, and simultaneous gestures of primitivism and futurism, all these buzzwords and values of modernity and postmodernity, amply exemplified in the cultural organization of our Canadian cities, ran directly counter to the Mennonite values, as we understood them, of cultural unity, extended families, the primacy of the gathered local community,

respect for tradition, orality, sobriety, emotional depth, spirituality, and a deep, long term relationship to the land.

Of course we knew, everyone knew, there were some practising Mennonites living in cities, including some of our own close relatives, but in the villages, they were understood to be playing with fire, as very obviously evidenced in the worldliness of their children growing up surrounded by strangers, unable to speak *Plautdietsch*, with its earthy, irreverent, humorous cadences, or perform all five verses of seventy German hymns in four part harmony on demand, ignorant of family relations beyond the first degree, more interested in jobs and money than community and gift exchange, unclear about the subtle rules of plain style dress or other kinds of proper decorum before elders, and with virtually no knowledge of the seasons and the land.

And then later, around the time of adolescence, as I remember it, the notion of wildness acquired a whole new range of meanings which were mysteriously connected to something our parents were suddenly and unexpectedly very worried about, a powerful erotic energy rising up in us, that threatened to disrupt all that carefully tended obedience and reasonableness in us with new and unexpected force. Suddenly we were in need of taming all over again. Wildness, in this context, was connected with sexuality, yes, particularly in its aspect of fertility, an amazing prospect to us barely pubescents, but also, perhaps more worrisomely, with intellectual curiosity and the desire for adventure and travel and independence. How amazing it was to consider that our awkward trembling selves apparently harboured the potential to publicly shame our families and our all powerful fathers, simply by relaxing a portion of our taught vigilance and allowing ourselves to get carried away with these new desires growing entirely unbidden though, admittedly, far from entirely unwelcome in us.

Much of our desire, my sister's and mine, was connected with our fantasies of escape to the wild city with its worldly enticements, in particular, the seduction of questionable places like libraries, bookstores, movie theatres, and the university, and also folk festivals and rock music concerts and bars with glittering dance floors and live theatre, all of which were designed to distract our attentions away from loyalty to Mennonite tradition. And thus it was that the leap from rural to urban, confusing and difficult and even dreary as it was in so many practical ways, having to learn how to negotiate cafeterias and bus schedules and apartment leases and job contracts and many other completely foreign inventions and arrangements with no prior understanding of them, and having to negotiate at the same time strong family opposition to our heedless abandonment of the village ways — so carefully protected and preserved, after all, at great social cost over numerous centuries — was coloured by a delicious erotic flavour, which was nicely fanned by the rhetoric of sixties counterculture, and then again later, by the various complex rhetorics of feminism and multiculturalism and other negotiations of plurality, all organized around notions of desire, coming after them.

I'm remembering, as I'm writing this, so many poignant moments in those first confusing years of city life, and after, how when I got married at the age of nineteen

my father wanted to give the newlyweds a side of beef as a wedding present, even though we were living in a one room apartment in the basement of the student residence at Canadian Mennonite Bible College with a tiny shared freezer at the end of the hall, and professed to be vegetarians. How suddenly people around me were asking seriously whether it was appropriate for married women to work, an astonishing question to me, having grown up surrounded by strong cheerful highly skilled extremely hard working farm women, who managed large flourishing farm households, cooking, baking, laundering, gardening, tending cows and pigs and chickens, canning vegetables, sewing, decorating our houses and organizing social events, while raising numerous children, more often than not singing lustily at the top of their voices. Women, as I knew them, in fact never seemed to stop working, and singing, even on Sundays when our fathers obediently hung up their hats, even while visiting each other, pleasurably fussing over embroidery or knitting or crocheting.

How my idea of quiet contemplation in those first years of city life was taking a nice long walk in the small forest behind the college, or in Assiniboine Park, after dark, until my friends found me out, furious at my stupid lack of caution in dangerous urban places. Not only were women not supposed to work in cities, it seemed, but they weren't even supposed to walk around! How I practised, consciously and pointedly, shutting down my senses enough to be able to ride city buses and walk along downtown sidewalks without tremendous information overload. How severely city people frowned upon singing or even humming in public places, a deeply ingrained habit inherited from the women in my family, that took me years of concentration and tongue biting to undo. How odd it seemed to me, when I first began frequenting restaurants, to have people sitting right next to each other pretending they weren't there.

I also consciously practised shutting down a considerable part of my mind, so as to participate in conversations with city people in a superficial enough, linear, rational fashion, setting aside the cosmic, global, systemic, mythopoetic, holistic, organic, intuitive way of thinking we'd been taught in the villages. Every time I walked into a building, for example, the village part of me wanted to know its whole history, who ordered it, who designed it, who built it, who paid for it, where the building materials came from, when it was built, who had used it from then onwards to the present, for what purposes, what its relation was to the rest of the street, and the city, and the culture, and the geography, and what was there before it. What its songs were, its dreams, its visions. I can tell you it's an exhausting experience thinking this way in the city, and I eventually learned to pretend nonchalance and blindness to my surroundings, as I observed it in my compatriots. Much later, I also realized, with some shock, that it isn't considered normal in the city to be able to sense precisely what other people are thinking and feeling, and even though I haven't been able to shut down this facility all that much, a gift of my deeply intuitive mother and aunts and grandmothers and of the ghost-filled prairie that whispered and sang all around us in the villages — nor do I really want to — still, I have learned to keep this knowledge more often to myself.

I'm remembering other moments of misunderstanding between village and city

ways in those years: how the Jason Robarts library appeared in my parents' eyes when they came to visit me at the University of Toronto, as rooms full of inexplicably flimsy, poorly built shelves, far below my father's sturdy carpenter's standards. How pitiful and culturally impoverished my M.A. graduation reception seemed to them, and to me, where hardly anyone knew anyone else and where neither singing nor beautiful oratory sweetened the hours of routine ceremony. How my mother kept asking me, after my children were born, what are you doing these days, Mrs. Friesen was asking me the other day and I just couldn't remember, and I'd say again, I'm going to school, mom, I'm studying to earn a Ph.D. in English literature, and I could see her trying to translate this information into something useful and practical and reasonable enough to tell Mrs. Friesen, when it mostly appeared to her, and also, I admit, sometimes to me, as nothing more than a monumental and tragic forgetting of our carefully guarded family treasury of detailed peasant skills and ceremonies. How nervous she was, attending my graduation ceremony at the University of Manitoba, hoping no one from the village would see her there and witness this latest embarrassing act of her daughter's. As it turned out, there was someone there who knew her, and she did have to face that no doubt extremely painful moment of simultaneous pride and shame as the mother of a daughter who broke so many of the village rules in pursuit of such dubious and incomprehensible achievements.

She didn't have that same confusion about my poetry. Unlike literary criticism, which is after all a kind of priestly, institutionally controlled, textual commentary deemed unnecessary by traditional Mennonites, as it is also to some extent in the contemporary Canadian popular mind, poetry was cherished and revered in our villages, both in its "high" incarnations as recited texts by Goethe or Heinrich Heine or hymn lyrics or the Bible itself, and its "low" versions as the children's recitations performed for Grandma at Christmas, or the freely improvised adaptations of the song "Parlez-vous" we made up for weddings and birthdays, or the endless comic, naughty ballads our uncles scribbled on the machine shed walls during harness season. Everyone in the villages knew exactly what poetry was, and understood precisely its imaginative power. (Unlike, for example, my undergraduate students in southern Ontario for whom poetry is, for the most part, a mysterious foreign language needing endless decoding, and even then, is made relevant to their lives only with the greatest intellectual effort.) That didn't mean a young woman with no official credentials should be writing it for publication, and especially she shouldn't be writing it about Mennonites, scattering our cultural secrets to strangers, blatantly selling us out to the world.

How I never did successfully integrate the reversal of private and public spheres in moving from Mennonite country life, where work is private and family and church are public, to modern city life, where it's the other way around, a failure that has caused much misunderstanding between me and numerous other people in both places over the years. And also much grief, in the sense of deep loss, of the gathered community that knows each of its members intimately, a privilege afforded after all only to the very rich and famous in mainstream North America. (Who

among us in cities will enjoy the extravagance of 1000 people attending our funerals, each of them connected with us in a deeply personal way, as is common in the villages?) Nor have I assimilated to any successful extent the notion that emotional expressiveness is generally considered a bad thing, at least in Anglo dominated urban circles, and that if you say something with feeling, your reasoning is probably suspect, or at the very least, you've been caught out in a humiliating act. (A recent public example would be American television anchorman Dan Rather's unintentional small sob during a David Letterman interview shortly after the events of September 11 in New York, which was portrayed as a serious professional lapse a few weeks later in an interview on Larry King Live. I will not apologize, said the recovered Dan Rather, slightly defiantly, what happened happened. I watched this with a pang, remembering how often both men and women in my village would cry in public when they were particularly moved by something, how those instances were honoured as communally shared moments of personal strength and truth telling, and how the separation of feeling from thinking would have been considered a dangerous splitting off in my home community, as indeed I still believe it is. Would we be living in a safer world just now if the New Yorkers and Americans generally had allowed themselves to cry and wail and sob together in those first few days instead of biting their lips and imagining revenge?)

Nor did I ever get used to the notion, characteristic of contemporary North American urban life, that art and literature and oratory are mostly decorative and have little bearing on our actual belief systems or the governance of the people, the nation. It was hard, very hard, I am not exaggerating when I say it nearly killed me, to field so much deep criticism from my family and the Mennonite community generally for daring to break many of our cultural taboos in writing *questions i asked my mother*, but I remember also how many of my artist friends at the time said, we envy you this audience who thinks what you write about matters that much. I might point out here, parenthetically, that it has been fashionable in urban theological circles for some time now, including in Mennonite circles, to criticize believers who mistake ethnic heritage and practices for faith. Even here at this conference I heard several speakers refer to the often-cited distinction between a fondness for *Warenickje* and belief in God. This is not a distinction that would have made sense to us in the villages, where we would have scoffed at such a bloodless and disembodied idea of faith and identity: if belief is not a cultural practice that shapes the physical daily lives of a community in profoundly structural and also aesthetically moving ways, then what is it, a noisy gong and a clanging cymbal. This was the reason our parents were so against the children moving to the city: at best they would become Sunday believers, assimilated into the mainstream the rest of the week.

It is impossible to think about the differences between rural Mennonite and contemporary Canadian urban cultures as I have tried to do here without reflecting on our different cultural genealogies. Many of my friends who grew up in Anglo urban households with Puritan histories and resonances, assume that because we Mennonites had strict rules of behavior which included plain style dress and

demeanor and restrictions on education and use of electronic media, that we were therefore Puritan, that is to say, sexually and emotionally repressed, more at home in our heads than our feelings or bodies, and taught like they were to be obsessed with cleanliness and look down on dirt, that we shared their Enlightenment derived Victorian style ideas about the superiority of theory over practice, individuality over community, the abstract over the physical, logical proof over intuition and belief, education over pragmatism, earnestness over laughter, and the urban and urbane over the rural and simple. They also assume we share their notions of gender, that women are the weaker, more vulnerable sex, that they aren't made for hard or dirty work but for beauty and decoration and entertainment, that women are less intelligent than men, that men mustn't allow themselves tender feelings because they may be called upon to make war to defend the weak women, that men are the main keepers of public space and cultural life, that complexity is better than simplicity, that social change is necessarily a good thing and superior to preserving the old ways, that ordinary people have no right or means to challenge government decisions or the cultural implications of intellectual expertise, and so on.

But of course this isn't true: surely the single most important reason for our cultural separatism and numerous migrations and endurance of so much political persecution over centuries was to protect and preserve our deep connection to the land and the veneration of our traditional cultural ways, which included all kinds of values that postmodern countercultures have tried with great difficulty to recover or reconstruct or remember in the past few decades: matrilocal extended families centered around homes and community and family gatherings presided over by several generations of singing women; an irreverent comic distrust of cultural hierarchies and so-called authority and expertise, whether bureaucratic, technological or intellectual; pacifism and the willingness to practice civil disobedience or migration to avoid military conflict; delight in physicality, sexuality, practicality, and dirt; emotional and artistic expressiveness in music and poetic language; and a deep belief in the spiritual economy of love.

If there is anyone here who missed out on the Mennonite celebration of dirt, let me describe some of my favourite remembered moments of it for you: how our mother would send us out on summer days after a rain shower to leap around in the puddles on the yard, quick, she'd say, before they're gone; how our father's side of the bedroom would sprout little dirt hills from his trousers and shoes during harvest season, to everyone's amusement; how coming into the house after an afternoon's hard play covered from top to toe in mud would be greeted by our mothers with approval and pleasure; how tenderly our fathers caressed the black earth in their fields around newly sprouted grain. It was Australian writer Sylvie Shaw who made me see how valuable this celebration of dirt was, after hearing her paper, "Reclaiming the Ecoerotic," in which she complains about the degradation of dirt and therefore loss of earthiness and eroticism in industrialized cultures. "One step towards overcoming the western disconnection to nature and to the natural body," she writes, "is to revise our attitude to dirt and the dirty body and rejoice in its wildness; to reclaim what I call our ecoerotic connection. Putting the body back into ecology."

(Unpublished paper, *For the Love of Nature?* International interdisciplinary conference held at Findhorn, Scotland, hosted by the Centre for Human Ecology, University of Edinburgh, Scotland, July 1998, 1). This was in the days before running water, by the way; all those farm clothes, stiff with dirt and grain dust and cow and pig manure, would be handwashed by our mothers on Mondays with the help of small handwringer washing machines and small electric water heaters and homemade soap, using hard well water carried in pails from the well across the yard, an exhausting daylong routine that did not stop them from thoroughly enjoying the spectacle of our numerous dirty pleasures, or even from joining in them occasionally, in the least.

Mennonite resistance to textualization and industrialization therefore, from the time of the so-called Radical Reformation onwards, wasn't because we were intellectually backwards but because we valued our oral peasant culture and had the chutzpah and communal strength to think we could successfully resist the violent multinational globalizing tactics of the 16th and 17th centuries in Europe, not wanting to be shepherded into factories and crowded city ghettos or culturally alienated suburbs as our English and Scottish compatriots were forced to do.

I realize I am offering a different genealogy of our Mennonite cultural affiliations than what you've been hearing at the rest of this conference. In particular, I am interested in Natasha Ostasheva Venger's and James Urry's claims that the Rüsslander Mennonites had become enthusiastic industrialists by the end of the 19th century in Russia, and that their settlements in Canada in the 1920s were located strategically close to cities, with an eye to not only direct commercial links but also the quick education and urbanization of their children. The version I'm giving you here is more typical of the Chortitza group, which emigrated to Canada from Ukraine in the 1870s, and was much less interested in urbanization or industrialization, and has continued, stubbornly, to practise a version of separatism despite the pressures of television and the new market globalization, which began to make their presence felt profoundly during the 1960s while I was growing up. But I would argue, as the sometimes loyal daughter of stubborn peasants whose roots in the land were deep deep, transplanted as they were from the Flemish flatlands, our primal landscape, to the Russian steppes, to the Canadian prairies — similar enough bio-regions to make the transplants hugely successful — and whose oral memories were long long, reaching back to the Burning Times and the exhortations of Menno Simons — whom we could quote nearly *verbatim* even though we didn't even know he'd written books — I will argue that the peasant version is, culturally speaking, the predominant one, at least in the following ways: it is closer to the original vision of the Mennonite movement; it is, I think, psychically accurate, if only in a guilty or nostalgic sense, even for those Mennonites who did flirt with urbanization and industrialization over the past two centuries; and it has been the source of most of the influential Mennonite literary writing in Canada during the past two decades.

I began to understand something of this separatist economic and political aspect of our Mennonite origins reading Carolyn Merchant's environmentalist history of

Western agriculture and science in *The Death of Nature*, a few years ago, particularly her description of the communitarian movements of Europe during the Reformation (Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*, New York: HarperCollins, 1980); and also from Roy Loewen's insightful sociological analyses of Mennonite farming and inheritance practices (Roy Loewen, *Family, Church and Market: A Mennonite Community in the Old and the New Worlds, 1850-1930*, Urbana and Chicago: 1993). I didn't learn it in the villages, where cultural separatism was theorized and sternly enforced, in almost exclusively aesthetic and feminine terms, while farming itself, during the postwar years of the 1950s and 60s while I was growing up, was cheerfully and unquestioningly assimilating to Canadian mainstream agricultural practices, through intense and rapid mechanization and chemicalization and corporatization. At least this was true in the area of land cultivation, which switched at that time from the open field grain system to corporate controlled cash crops like sugar beets and canola. If our fathers had any ambivalence about this commercial selling out of our separatism, or about the violent, multinational and even military resonances of these practices, which so dramatically contradicted our pacifist and separatist beliefs in other areas of our lives (through the use of pesticides whose development was closely linked with that of defoliation agents used in the Viet Nam war, for example), we never heard about it.

And yet, there was a fierce ongoing attunement, throughout this period of accelerated modernization of farming methods in the villages, to the rhythms of the seasons and animals and the weather, a profound appreciation of how deeply our lives as humans were intertwined with and dependent on nature. Our celebration of religious holidays remained intensely tied to the seasons; Easter was a happy holiday despite the crucifixion, mostly about spring and new life (and new clothes!), and Christmas a dark, sombre time of self-reflection, despite the babe in the manger, directly connected to the dying of the year. At least that is how I remember them. The preparation of food, too, retained its ancient ritual character; November was the month of *Schwienschlacht*, a month of pig killing festivals involving the entire village, and carrying both sacrificial and holiday overtones.

Nature, for us, unlike the calm distant, neutered picturesque landscape of English Romanticism we learned about in school, which required only gazing at in sublime aesthetic appreciation, was a fierce, fertile living presence, to be fought with and calved and bled; a female and maternal presence, dare I say, whom we feared and revered and were hungrily, pleasurably, gratefully suckled by. History, too, was not a linear progression of events whose purpose and impact was innovation and change, as we are accustomed to thinking of it in the modern world, but rather, an endlessly repeating round of birth and death, weddings and funerals, workdays and Sundays, a careful, judicious negotiation with change for the purpose of preserving our ancient cultural ways, most of them vastly predating our post-Reformation political identity as the followers of Menno Simons. Many Mennonites, under the influence of the church, would no doubt like to deny this pagan aspect of our peasant heritage and origin, but there it is, and who is to say,

among the numerous changes involved in moving from agrarian to urban lifestyles which of our Mennonite customs and values are the crucial ones to valorize?

When my mother moved from our family village farm to the nearby town in her early sixties, I asked her what she missed the most about the farm. Getting up before sunrise, she said, going outside into the cold crisp clear winter air under a starry sky and then into the warm barn to milk the cows, putting her head against the cow's belly, stroking the soft bulging udder and feeling the milk squirting through her hands into the milk pail with a little zing. Our grandmother, too, bearer and suckler of ten children, loved milking the cows. Though she was well practised in Mennonite obedience and submissiveness in public and around men, she was lusty and exuberant among the cows, the fastest, strongest milker in the village, singing hymns at the top of her voice, or laughing uproariously at some observed human foible, confidently and gracefully swinging brimming large steaming pails of milk. When I first read Quebecoise Metisse writer Jovette Marchessault's brilliant visionary monologue *Night Cows*, with its memorable opening, "My mother is a cow, and I am a cow too," followed by a dizzying description of nightly maternal escapades into the exuberant dream space/time of the Milky Way, I understood what she meant (Jovette Marchessault, *Lesbian Triptych*, trans. Yvonne Klein, Toronto: Women's Press, 1985).

Now, here I am faced with a confusing question: if the genealogy I have traced here is a reasonably accurate one, then for my WASP and northern European friends it is we Mennonites whose values are "wild" and unruly and anarchistic and socially dangerous to their status quo, and well, we remember that fact with vividness, do we not, how we were persecuted in large numbers in northern Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries, tortured and burned at the stake, drowned in rivers, and hounded out of our mother countries for precisely such reasons? So then I ask myself, did we, do we really hate and fear wildness, we Mennonites, haven't we in fact really loved it, haven't we located ourselves geographically on the edge of it, the edge of the wild prairie, the steppes, the Chaco, the Mexican desert, whenever we found ourselves moving due to changed political circumstances? Isn't that where we have been most comfortable, balancing on the precarious edge between so-called "civilization" and "wildness"? Haven't we, socially speaking, been more comfortable locating ourselves next to Turkish and Aboriginal and Métis communities with oral, tribal, hunting-gathering sensibilities than within modern post-industrial hierarchical bureaucracies?

Isn't this, I ask myself, what I'm most nostalgic about when I think of my Mennonite heritage, living as I do now in the staid, organized factory culture of southern Ontario, where my students and their families rarely dream of challenging the practices of large scale manufacturing or corporate multinationalism or the war in Afghanistan; in the eastern side of our continent where I am told 90% of the women don't know what sexual orgasm is (and what does that tell us then about the men, and about their lives together); where strong feelings and physicality and emotional expressiveness and spontaneous laughter and dirt are frowned upon as inappropriate and possibly obscene, while the extensive degradation of air and

water through heavy industry is regarded as reasonable and respectable and clean? Isn't this what I am most grateful for to my ancestors, to have grown up in a culture which claimed for itself the right to hold onto its economic and cultural self-determination despite overwhelming pressures to give them up?

Then why at the same time were we so nervous about other kinds of wildness, nervous enough to allow ourselves extensive violence in the attempted eradication of it in our children and animals and fields and gardens? Nervous enough to drive our artists and visionaries from our communities, even shunning them from family gatherings and personal relationships with family members (as has been done to me for several years now)? And whatever happened to even traditional forms of wildness in the Mennonite community? Where are the Mennonite voices protesting against multinational corporatization and environmental degradation during this time of great ecological peril? Where are our communal demonstrations against, or even withdrawals of structural support from, American world domination and the alarming new war against the poorest countries of the world?

What is wildness, exactly? Obviously it is not just disorder or chaos or negativity or evil, since when we look it in the eye, we see that one community's wildness is the other's social organization, and one person or species' wildness is another's carefully preserved and necessary life spirit. Wildness seems to be profoundly about otherness: a radical irreducible difference at the heart of all living beings and organisms and communities. But, as those of us who were brought up wrestling with wildness know deeply, it is more radically dynamic than that: an energetic fiery free-spiritedness that also connects these differences in unexpected, erotic and magical ways, and that apparently resides at the very heart of life on this planet. Native people call this energy variously the trickster, Raven, the shapeshifter, Changing Woman, and so on, and honour these beings with fear and reverence and laughter, as God (Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1986).

Western culture, by contrast, has been obsessed with domesticating and/or eradicating wildness (and perhaps laughter and joy and creativity and pleasure along with it) in people, plants, animals, and ecosystems, while at the same time desperately desiring and needing its power. There have been many theories to justify the human-centered project of planetary domestication through the centuries, including, recently, the Gaian theory of earth management made popular by James E. Lovelock and his followers, who claim to be environmentalists but, as critic John Livingstone observes, still hold to the belief that "only through human agency does planet Earth become whole and complete, self-aware in the human image" (John A. Livingstone, *Rogue Primate: An Exploration of Human Domestication*, Key Porter Books, 1994, 211, n.8). Livingstone proposes, as an alternative to "the destiny of earth as a human monoculture," the cultivation of respect for the inherent wildness of all living beings, which he describes eloquently as follows:

Wildness is not acquired through covenant or dispensation. Wildness *is*,

and has been, from the beginning. It is not merely an evolved phenomenon: it is a quality of being, and a precondition of having become. As such, it is beyond the reach of rationality; it is previous, and transcendent. It has no missing parts, either through mutation or amputation. It requires no prosthetic devices, no fixing, no reordering, no moral overlays. Wildness requires no organizational intervention, even of the purest and highest democratic sort. Wildness is whole. It is the antithesis of the domesticated human state, uncontaminated by power, claims to power, or the need for power (Livingston 172).

What if we spent our imaginative energies celebrating and honouring wildness, and locating ourselves within it, as Metis poet Gregory Scofield does in his poem, "'Oskan-Ācimowina (Bone Stories)":

Before I was flesh and bone,
I was magpie
in her blood, singing
in her belly

all winter.

Before

I had bone songs, stories
of weeds and stones
there was a great sky
shimmering with stars.

(Prairie Fire Magazine:

First Voices, First Words, ed. Thomas King, 22/3 (Autumn 2001): 113-114.

It was freedom, akin to wildness understood in this way, that I came to the city, this city, Winnipeg, in search of, when I abandoned, or perhaps I should say fled, the peasant Mennonite village culture of my heritage at age 17, bereft, heartbroken, terrified, but also hugely optimistic and ready for adventure. I can say that I found it here in this beautiful city that I love, with its beautiful parks and forests and rivers and grasses, haven to wild deer and beavers and rabbits and squirrels and numerous kinds of birds and fish and other creatures, its treelined streets, its rich cultural life, its urban offer of anonymity and experimentation and encounters with diversity, its fierce struggle to exist and flourish against numerous environmental and economic obstacles. I found here also that other necessary ingredient to the artist's life, a strong artistic community, interested in every kind of creative expression, and numerous mentors and peers, George and Esther Wiebe, Les Brandt and Patrick Friesen and Robert Kroetsch and Carol Shields and Sandra Birdsell and Armin

Wiebe and Jan Horner and Annharte and Aganetha Dyck and Diana Thorneycroft and many others, many of them in fact ex-peasant Mennonites like me, and most of them negotiating interesting cultural leaps of their own. These generous courageous people taught me, among other things, that discontinuities and contradictions in my cultural identity were occasions of celebration as well as lament, and shared with me the joy and terror of learning to dance with the words, and make them shake.

Some urban theorists are now arguing that the city is obsolete, having been replaced by homogeneous conglomerates of highways and suburban hamlets, that "place" in this sense has been replaced by "space" (cf. Gerald MacLean, Donna Landry, and Joseph P. Ward, eds, "Introduction," *The Country and the City Revisited*, London: Cambridge UP, 1999, 1-23). While this is true of much of central and eastern North America, including southern Ontario where I now live, it is decidedly not true of the prairies, where cities have very distinct circumferences, and possess strongly identifiable characters in the manner of the great cities established in previous eras, Paris, London, Barcelona, New York, if I may make such a grand comparison. One of the reasons our prairie cities have retained their distinctive characters is surely because of the distance between them, but another, ironically, is because they were left out of the great economic boom of eastern Canada and the U.S. during the past few decades. This fact has created economic hardship for many citizens and forced many others to leave, including myself, but it also means that the population size has been relatively stable, housing prices have remained low, and pollution and industry have been kept at a much more manageable level than in the East. In Windsor where I now live, for example, you can get a chemical burn from putting your hands into the silt of the Detroit River, and many of the fish are growing plum sized protruding tumours on their skins. Though I have to tell you how nice it is to see cicadas and butterflies and fireflies still flourishing in eastern Canada and the United States, when we've sprayed most of them to death on the prairies.

Mosquito spraying and rising cancer rates notwithstanding, Winnipeg has been able to hold on, in these brutally commercial times, to its established character as, among other things, a cultural gateway, a meeting place, the Forks, elegantly poised on the axis between eastern and western North America with their very different geographical and cultural orientations. It is also vitally located on the dynamic, creative and tragic edge between prairie First Nations and a variety of settler cultures, many with tragic histories similar to ours, at the place where we must negotiate together our separate and shared destinies. Perhaps it is this unique mix of cultural/geographical factors that has nurtured Winnipeg's strong creative character and turned it into an internationally renowned artists' mecca, with more music and drama and film and literary festivals and bookstores and theatres per capita than any other city I know of. When I think of "city," therefore, it is Winnipeg, the city I have lived in the longest and love the most, proud, stubborn, elegant, shabby, gracious, desperate, playful, violent, flourishing, hot, cold, easy, struggling, that I think of most. I feel lucky to have had my artistic apprenticeship and to have

been able to raise my children in Winnipeg, surrounded by the great singing prairie. Though it was once a place of great spatial and cultural confusion for me, as a newly arrived village peasant girl from Reinland, Manitoba, and though I will spend the rest of my life mourning the irreplaceable loss of my fierce stubbornly self-sufficient Plautdietsch Mennonite peasant village heritage, my beloved mother culture/mother tongue/mother land, this city became, in a profound sense, home for me, and I consider it so still.

I wish to thank Kathy Bergen, Dorothy Friesen, Daphne Marlatt and Eunice Scarfe for stimulating conversations about cultural identity which influenced the writing of this paper.