

Katie Funk Wiebe Tells Her Story: A Personal and Communal Narrative History

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At the 1998 Mennonite Studies conference at the University of Winnipeg, Katie Funk Wiebe observed in her paper, “Me Tarzan, Son of Menno–You Jane, Mennonite Mama,” that women were often “expected to remain in the private domain” reflecting “what most Mennonites found comfortable: silence, modesty, and submission.”¹ Katie² argued that since the life stories of ordinary women were virtually absent from the public historical record, they represented an underside of the Mennonite story that still needed to be told. Katie further suggested that Mennonites must “ask new questions and find a new way of writing history so that public and private areas of life together form the basis of our story.”³ Marlene Epp took on this challenge in her impressive history of Mennonite women in Canada, where, in the first sentence, she acknowledges Katie’s inspiration and quotes this very paper.⁴

Katie, who is now in her mid-eighties, has recently published her autobiography, *You Never Gave Me a Name: One Mennonite Woman’s Story*, which reflects her continuing affinity for autobiographical narrative as it is the fifth book she has written in this genre since 1976.⁵ In *You Never Gave Me a Name* Katie examines her journey from naïveté

to maturity over the course of almost sixty-five years by embedding her individual story within the communal history of the Mennonite Brethren. Katie intentionally sets out to explore “the theological and social factors” that have shaped her life.⁶

Autobiography as a genre is characterized by its consideration of “concretely experienced reality from a retrospective point of view.”⁷ The value of autobiography as history has traditionally been suspect due to concerns about the ability of the author to establish a critical distance between being both an objective observer and a subjective participant.⁸ Yet the “heightened sense of history as a narrative creation” challenges us to acknowledge autobiography as a legitimate, though perhaps unconventional, source of history.⁹ New questions must be asked in order to recognize the contribution of autobiographical narrative for our portrayal of history.

Women’s autobiography, in particular, was initially analyzed for gender differences when it first emerged as a distinct field of study around 1980. For example, Estelle Jelinek claimed that women concentrated on their personal lives, which revolved around domestic details and relationships, while men chronicled their professional lives in relation to the affairs of the world.¹⁰ Jelinek argued that while men attempted to idealize their lives as success stories with universal import, women sought to authenticate themselves by sifting through their lives for explanation and understanding.¹¹ Even though these sweeping generalizations “have been challenged as gender essentialism from within feminist theory,” they do seem to echo the distinction between public and private spheres articulated by Katie.¹² Helen Buss, more recently argues that women use life writing as the means by which they “establish necessary connections between the private and public, the personal and the political.”¹³

Katie’s own story dissuades attempts to define public and private spheres as gendered categories, thus challenging us to move beyond a reductionist approach.¹⁴ My interest here is to explore how Katie’s autobiography functions as both a personal and communal narrative history through the integration of the private and public spheres of her life. I will also consider how this private/public distinction intersects with the thematic framework that Katie uses to bring coherence to her life story.

Identity

The title to Katie’s autobiography, *You Never Gave Me a Name*, highlights identity as the pervasive theme woven through the tapestry of her life story. Initially she objected to the name Katie:

I didn't like it growing up because it didn't sound sophisticated enough to suit my ambitions...My name seemed so plain, so unimaginative. I couldn't understand any parents saddling a child with such a burden... "Why didn't you give me a real name?" I complained to my mother.¹⁵

As she matured, she resisted a name that was chained to a Mennonite community, which expected no more of her than silence and submission. She didn't want to become her name. Yet she remained Katie, despite her elusive namesake Katarina, childhood diminutives like Trien or Tina, or her youthful attempts to forge a new path as Kay.

Katie recognized the irony of a name is that it is a gift of others, which you must bear as your own. Eventually she realized it was her choices that filled her name with significance and established her identity. But she also began to comprehend her identity had roots that were nurtured within a particular community, with all its weaknesses and mistakes as well as its strengths and joys. This took time to embrace. And so her cry, "you never gave me a name," can also be seen as directed towards the Mennonite Brethren, as this community was embodied in local congregations, church practices, conference leaders, and structural entities. Katie refused to be a nameless woman.

So Katie's autobiography self consciously seeks to establish her identity, which finds expression not only within her personal story but also within the journey of the Mennonite Brethren. What emerges is a portrayal of the Mennonite Brethren that depicts their struggle to articulate a communal identity. The mixed lineage of Anabaptism and evangelicalism represents for Mennonite Brethren the appeal of an elusive namesake that still requires them to forge their own way within contemporary society. It is this intersection of personal and communal identity that provides a helpful framework for exploring how the private and public spheres are integrated within Katie's story.

Katie the Student

Katie's autobiography begins with her arrival in Winnipeg in 1945 to attend Mennonite Brethren Bible College (MBBC) and work part-time as the personal secretary of J.B. Toews, the new president of the college. She had just spent several years employed as a legal secretary in Saskatoon and was confident in her abilities as a stenographer, though, as a student she was inexperienced and impressionable. Katie's two years at MBBC were identity shaping; in her words, "enriching and stimulating, if sometimes unsettling."¹⁶

Katie arrived at MBBC during its second year of operation when enrollment mushroomed to eighty students from twenty the year before. Presumably the faculty intended the classroom to be the primary medium of formation for students, but Katie makes only passing reference to her classes. She remembers that women who made up twenty percent of the student body were advised out of theology courses, which didn't seem to bother her too much at the time because she didn't know what theology was.¹⁷ Katie was blissfully naïve about the incongruity between how the church viewed women and her own sense of freedom growing up in a home and community where she "never knowingly met discrimination" because she was a girl.¹⁸ At MBBC the unquestioned assumption was that a woman's place was in the home and her role in church did not extend beyond women's circles, caring for children, and supporting her husband behind the scenes.

Katie does recall the strange boundaries and strict rules that seemed intent on keeping men and women from fraternizing. "We were expected to call one another Mr. and Miss at all times to keep relationships platonic, an amusing thought. I liked boyfriends who had first names, not men I had to call 'Mr.'"¹⁹ Katie gladly gave up lipstick and earrings in order to fit into the college's standards. The intent of this fledging institution was not only to instill Mennonite Brethren doctrine in students but also to maintain boundaries that presumably shut out foreign social and moral influences.

Despite the faculty's teaching, Katie notes that students themselves "pulled together from many sources a strange amalgam of faith elements."²⁰ She recalls that the word "Anabaptism" was still foreign to her vocabulary. While students reflected Mennonite Brethren's zeal for evangelism, missions, and Bible study, their private lives mirrored the hyper-spirituality indicative of the fundamentalist piety of the time. Katie saw in both faculty and students the willingness to sacrifice their time, energy, and finances in response to their call to serve. Humility was held up as the highest spiritual virtue, while pride was labeled the greatest sin. Blind faith was valued over conscious choice as the basis for decision-making. Katie's natural confidence and decisiveness were being eroded.

Katie's personal experience as a student at MBBC provides a concrete expression of the intuitive, yet undefined, theology of Mennonite Brethren during the mid-twentieth century. Her depiction highlights how the Mennonite Brethren's lack of "a clear understanding of their historical background and theological distinctives" worked itself out in students' lives.²¹ Ironically Katie's own identity was being molded by a community that was struggling to articulate its own convictions. Despite this ambiguity, her time at MBBC forged a deep theological

rut that she willingly followed without question. In time this thinking would form a crucible for her own discomfort as a woman in the church.

Katie at Home and in the Church

Katie continues her narrative by describing her marriage to Walter Wiebe in 1947. She assumed she would find complete fulfillment in her idealized conception of marriage, yet despite keeping busy with the domestic tasks that came with a growing family, Katie encountered an unexpected barrenness:

As a young married woman I felt part of me was living in a void, but I numbed myself to the emptiness because I thought I shouldn't feel that way. The problem was with me...I was doing what I had always dreamed about—being married. Why should I ask for more? I couldn't grasp that the spirit, the mind, the imagination, the inner life, must also be satisfied or its hunger pains can lead to another kind of death.²²

In contrast, Katie's public identity was wrapped up in her husband, whose increasing status among the Mennonite Brethren symbolized that she too was moving up. She could now call herself, "Mrs. Rev. Walter Wiebe."²³ Slowly, however, it began to dawn on Katie that although they were both members of the same church, it felt as if Walter had first-class citizenship while she had only second-class citizenship.²⁴ She became increasingly distressed both by women's disinterest in their own spiritual and intellectual growth and the church's lack of concern for the use of women's gifts beyond traditional expectations. Katie wrestled with what to do: "To accept that all women had to conform to one mold crushed my spirit. I determined to accept myself and my gifts even if others might consider me strange if I chose reading over canning and writing over quilting. To accept myself meant listening to myself. I started to listen to the silence within."²⁵

Katie sensed a faint nudge within her to write, but she had no role models and no encouragement.²⁶ Within the larger Mennonite world, at that time, all "positions like publishers, editors, and writers were filled by men," even though women represented the majority of readers.²⁷ Walter eventually encouraged Orlando Harms, editor of *The Christian Leader*, to ask Katie to write a women's column for the U.S. based Mennonite Brethren magazine, which she began in 1962.

That same year, only seven weeks after moving to Hillsboro, Kansas, where Walter had taken a position as a book and literature

editor, he died suddenly from a rare non-cancerous growth. Katie was now a widow in a foreign country facing the prospect of raising her four children alone. For Katie “widowhood changed the road signs” and she was now walking down a frightening new path.²⁸

But widowhood had also unexpectedly catapulted Katie into the public sphere. The taboo prevalent in the church against mothers working outside the home was lifted for Katie because she now had a family to support. At first she worked as a copy editor to put bread on the table, but an invitation to teach English at Tabor College provided an exciting opportunity to pursue her writing.

Katie’s role as a column writer gave her a public voice few Mennonite women had. She saw her columns as essays testing ideas, which included the implications of the changing status of women in society for the church. To succeed, Katie realized she needed to change her view of women in the church and venture into areas of thought not usually open to women. She recalls:

For a while every time I sat down to write, a jury of twelve solemn men in dark suits with large black thumb-indexed Bibles open to 1 Timothy watched me work. It took years to realize the barriers to women’s greater involvement were not divine interdicts but human concoctions, deeply embedded in me.²⁹

She slowly began to acknowledge that she had the right to speak about the church simply because she was a member.³⁰ She could no longer squelch the voice that told her that “to describe women’s roles only in terms of limitations, rather than opportunities was wrong.”³¹

At first Katie’s attempt to listen to the silence within was a lonely journey and she questioned whether there was something wrong with her.³² Reading Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* shook Katie thoroughly because she couldn’t believe that thousands of women might possibly be feeling the same way she did.³³ Eventually Katie realized that the opportunity to write and speak openly and publicly about her own struggles and joys as a woman in the church—“wrapping words around thoughts readers were struggling to articulate”—was the greatest gift she could offer.³⁴

Katie’s story illustrates how movement from the private to public sphere entails much more than simply entering the work force or having the opportunity to speak. For Katie, this move necessitated a shift in thinking, which compelled her to reexamine the core convictions that defined her identity. She began to grasp that the Bible actually freed her as a woman to “discover the wonders of mind and spirit.”³⁵ By naming the gift that had been enveloped in silence, she was freed to use it. The recognition that she had both the ability and the responsibility to

choose was a tremendous breakthrough for Katie because it signified the capacity to change her identity.³⁶

Katie's depiction of how she found her own voice as a woman paradoxically reveals the silence of the Mennonite Brethren church regarding the changing roles of women during the 1960s and 1970s. Conference leaders "never considered women at all" in their planning for events.³⁷ Men who supported greater involvement of women were unwilling to speak publicly while women themselves were fearful and uncertain about stepping outside long-held traditional roles.³⁸ For many years Katie sought to encourage discussion at the grassroots level within the church, although she felt her attempts were essentially a monologue. Mennonite Brethren could not envision changing.

Katie observes how Mennonite Brethren "dealt with the issue of women's roles reluctantly, often with great pain and discomfort on the part of all concerned."³⁹ At a communal level no Mennonite Brethren committee or board was initially willing to accept responsibility for this issue. Yet Katie, with her public voice, refused to allow the personal experience of women in the church to remain invisible; relegated to the private domain. Katie's unique contribution was her ability to cross over the chasm that separated the private and public spheres by giving voice to personal experience.

Katie the Elder

In her retirement years Katie moved out of the public sphere once again. She was honored with the appointment of Professor Emeritus after a twenty-four year career at Tabor College and she concluded her regular column in *The Christian Leader* after a thirty year run. Katie soon realized she needed a new identity again; one that no longer defined who she was by what she did or used to be.⁴⁰ How could she find meaning in her old age that still reflected the needs of her mind and spirit?

As Katie looked around her it didn't take long for her to recognize the waste of older adults' resources just as she had seen earlier with women's lives. Position, power, and significance—often the source of meaning and the basis of identity—had dissipated, yet life continued. So Katie began to put a voice to her own experience of aging. When Katie made the deliberate choice to live as an elder, she realized that the core issues hadn't changed much. "To live means to keep developing the inner life,...stay in relationship with people and God," and become a contributor with the gifts one has.⁴¹ The task of an elder is to learn to be real, because then "the person and not what he or she can still do is valued."⁴²

Katie calls on older adults to harvest their lives, that is, consciously return to the past and then do something with it.⁴³ Katie describes her years as an older adult as “a second kind of growing up—sorting, learning to respond differently to old stimuli—to come up with an understanding of God that is mine—not one thrust on me by old experiences.”⁴⁴ Yet she also acknowledges that “the theology learned as a child is hard to identify and discard.”⁴⁵ The traces continue to linger and any attempt to escape early influences is like “trying to get rid of your DNA.”⁴⁶

At this stage, Katie has a much clearer understanding of the formative messages she received as a child and young adult. Her father’s ambivalent identification with the Mennonite Brethren and the permeable denominational lines she experienced growing up in a religiously diverse community have provided her with an enlarged vision of the church. Katie has reassessed the appeal of fundamentalism, with its emphasis on biblical literalism and legalism, which was so pervasive among Mennonite Brethren when Katie was a young adult. She now recognizes the dangers of overemphasizing evangelism without discipleship, individualism without community, or individual sin without an awareness of structural sin.

Nevertheless, Mennonite Brethren continue to remain an enigma to Katie, in part because of the tensions that emerge when Anabaptist and evangelical convictions are held together. Katie values Mennonite Brethren biblicism and their open spirituality, but she is wary of a “fortress mentality” that is overly concerned with who’s in and who’s out and troubled by the absence of a sense of the mystery of God. When asked why she has stayed in the Mennonite Brethren church, Katie responded, “only as a member can I continue to speak to the church... When I am no longer a member, my voice is silent.”⁴⁷

Katie’s ongoing reassessment of her convictions as an older adult demonstrates the dynamic nature of personal identity. Her public voice emerges as an essential dimension of her identity and the basis for her identification with the Mennonite Brethren. The significance of Katie’s voice is in its potential to effect communal change. So at a time when most older adults have lost their voice, Katie continues to bridge the private and public spheres by sharing her personal experiences through her writing.⁴⁸

Katie’s reflections about the Mennonite Brethren highlight continuing concerns regarding the ambiguity of their communal identity. Katie’s willingness to assess her own personal convictions as an older adult underlines the significance of making deliberate choices, which is also applicable at the communal level. But while Katie has been able to make her identity her own, a clear articulation of a Mennonite Brethren identity remains elusive. Can Mennonite Brethren follow

Katie's example and engage in an honest assessment of past influences as well as enter into reflective conversation regarding their shared convictions?

Conclusion

You Never Gave Me a Name is another attempt by Katie to give voice to the silence within: "What do I do with this craving inside me to write—to wrap the experiences of life in words and let others see what my life has been?"⁴⁹ Katie's story makes visible the experience of one woman among the Mennonite Brethren. I have only been able to allude to the rich interplay between private and public spheres that emerges from the nebulous but alluring relationship between autobiography and history. Katie's story challenges us to ask new questions about the interwoven nature of personal and communal narratives, which can enable us to perceive a fuller more holistic picture of our selves.

In 1981, only six years after J.A. Toews completed his *History of the Mennonite Brethren Church*, Katie wrote,

Some day when a more complete history of the Mennonite Brethren church is written, I hope that it will include, along with the public church movements and decisions, the private personal history of its women, the domestic history of the family, the ways in which male-dominated institutions have affected women's and men's lives, and how the feminist consciousness in the Mennonite Brethren church started.⁵⁰

I think Katie has taken on her own challenge.

Notes

- ¹ Katie Funk Wiebe, "Me Tarzan, Son of Menno—You Jane, Mennonite Mama," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 17 (1999): 10.
- ² The use of "Katie" is in no way intended to show disrespect, even though it goes against conventional protocol. I chose to use her first name because her autobiography highlights the significance of her identity as "Katie"; the use of the more intimate first name challenges the public/private dichotomy Katie herself resists by integrating the "private" domain into a public academic paper; and references to "Katie" are set in contrast to Mennonite Brethren as a corporate entity, thus emphasizing the personal/communal dimensions of identity.
- ³ Funk Wiebe, "Me Tarzan," 15.
- ⁴ Marlene Epp, *Mennonite Women in Canada: A History* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2008), 3.
- ⁵ Katie Funk Wiebe, *You Never Gave Me a Name: One Mennonite Woman's Story* (Telford: Dreamseeker Books, 2009). See also Katie F. Wiebe, *Alone: A Widow's*

Search for Joy (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1976); Katie Funk Wiebe, *Bless Me Too, My Father* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1988); Katie Funk Wiebe, *Border Crossing: A Spiritual Journey* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1995); and Katie Funk Wiebe, *The Storekeeper's Daughter: A Memoir* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1997).

- ⁶ Wiebe, *You Never Gave Me a Name*, 15.
- ⁷ Mary Cisar, "Mennonite Women's Autobiography: An Interdisciplinary Feminist Approach," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 14 (1996): 144. Helen Buss suggests that "memoir," as "a testimony of a writer who has 'personal knowledge' of the events, the era, or the people of its subject," is a better descriptive genre of life writing than autobiography. Buss argues that "memoir" is popular with women because it can be used to "interrogate the private individual's relationship to a history and/or a culture from which she find her experience of her self and her life excluded." See Helen M. Buss, *Repossessing the World: Reading Memoirs by Contemporary Women* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2002), 2-3, 187. While Katie is aware of the genre debate regarding autobiography and memoir, she consistently refers to *You Never Gave Me a Name* as an autobiography. See Katie Funk Wiebe, *Good Times with Old Times: How to Write Your Memoirs* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1979), 38-39; and Wiebe, *You Never Gave Me a Name*, 15, 17, 247.
- ⁸ Jaume Aurell, "Autobiography as Unconventional History: Constructing the Author," *Rethinking History* 10, no. 3 (September 2006): 434.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 447. See also Jeremy D. Popkin, *History, Historians, & Autobiography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 19. Popkin notes that "autobiographical texts have come to be seen as valuable sources for social and cultural history."
- ¹⁰ Estelle C. Jelinek, "Introduction: Women's Autobiography and the Male Tradition," in *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Estelle C. Jelinek (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 7-8. See also Susan Stanford Friedman, "Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice," in *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Shari Benstock (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 34-62.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 14-15.
- ¹² Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, "Introduction: Situating Subjectivity in Women's Autobiographical Practices," in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 40.
- ¹³ Buss, *Repossessing the World*, 3.
- ¹⁴ Cisar uses the inside-outside dichotomy as a means for examining women's autobiographies. See Cisar, "Mennonite Women's Autobiography," 143.
- ¹⁵ Wiebe, *You Never Gave Me a Name*, 11.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 25-26.
- ¹⁸ Katie Funk Wiebe, "Color Me a Person," *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, December 28, 1973, 2.
- ¹⁹ Wiebe, *You Never Gave Me a Name*, 25.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 38-39.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 23.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 73-74.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 69.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 73.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 79.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 72.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 161.
- ²⁸ Katie Funk Wiebe, "Growing with the Seasons of Life," *Direction* 24, no.2 (Fall 1995): 77. See also Wiebe, *Alone: A Widow's Search for Joy*, 290.
- ²⁹ Wiebe, *You Never Gave Me a Name*, 166.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 163.

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- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 202.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 198.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 120, 199. See Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1963).
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 114.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 193.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 193.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 120.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 196, 197.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 196.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 236.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 243.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 245.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, 247.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 263.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 264.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 263.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 263-264.
- ⁴⁸ Katie has spent considerable effort encouraging older adults to write their memoirs. See Wiebe, *Good Times with Old Times*; and Katie Funk Wiebe, *How to Write Your Personal or Family History: If You Don't Do It, Who Will?* (Intercourse: Good Books, 2009).
- ⁴⁹ Wiebe, *You Never Gave Me a Name*, 13.
- ⁵⁰ Katie Funk Wiebe, "Mennonite Brethren Women: Images and Realities of the Early Years," *Mennonite Life* 36, no. 3 (September 1981): 28. See John A. Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church: Pilgrims and Pioneers* (Fresno: Board of Christian Literature, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1975).