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Don't Let the Mennonites See

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Figure 1: *Grow From Within* by Megan Goodwin

Don't Let the Mennonites See

Kaitlin Roetcisoender

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AS I sit down on the long grayish-brown couch with my mother, memories from my childhood and past stories she has told me run through my mind. Our many family gatherings come to mind, filled with interactions with our Mennonite and ex-Mennonite relatives. We always went to Belleville, Pennsylvania for these reunions because that is where most of my extended family grew up. Almost all of my grandmother's eighteen siblings, my grandpa's four siblings, their spouses, and their children would show up. There was never space for all of us, and the kids usually had to sleep on the floor. It was organized chaos for a week, with dozens of family members from many different states, with my family being the furthest in California. Most of the older people there had grown up in the Mennonite church and left to become Christians. Some were still in the Mennonite church and had raised their families in it as well.

I remember going to one of these family reunions when I was much younger, playing with some of my second cousins and asking them how to tell the difference between the Amish and Mennonite people. They told me that the Amish use no machines or electricity at all, while the Mennonites do use some modern technology to help with the farming. Some of them even have cell phones. Another difference is that Mennonites can, and often do, wear patterned cape dresses. A cape dress is a floor length, long sleeved dress with the neckline of a turtleneck. They are the traditional Amish and Mennonite clothes for the women and girls. The Amish only wear plain dresses because they view patterned fabric as too flashy and prideful. Of course, my two cousins were Mennonite; the only Amish relatives I had were on my grandfather's side and I had never met any of them.

My grandfather was a part of the Amish church until his father left and became a Mennonite. My grandfather was five years old when this happened. Because my great grandfather left, he and his family were shunned from the rest of his family, long before even my mother was born. This is why I have never met any of my Amish relatives. My great grandfather was a cantankerous man – when he disagreed, he disagreed loudly. And he disagreed with the Amish church. The leaders in Amish churches discourage their followers from reading the Bible, claiming that it is too complicated for a regular person to understand. So my great grandfather picked up his Bible and began to read. He read John 10:28-30 (*English*

Standard Version), which says, "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one can snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one." Even though my great grandfather had only up to an eighth-grade education, maybe even less than that, he knew that the verse he had just read was opposed to what his church was teaching. The Amish preach that no one can know if they are saved, because the notion of feeling secure in one's salvation is viewed as prideful, and the prideful go to hell. So he took his whole family, left the Amish church, and joined the Mennonite church.

My grandfather and grandmother both grew up plain Mennonites. "Plain" meaning conservative. The more plain the Mennonite, the more conservative they are. I remember another story my mother has told me many times. It's about how my grandfather and grandmother met at a Mennonite Bible camp and, somehow, my grandmother ended up doing his laundry for him. The women were always expected to serve the men. When he proposed, he asked if she would do his laundry for the rest of his life, instead of the classic "Will you marry me?" And she said yes. My family still makes fun of them for that, mostly my grandmother for actually saying yes. They were still Mennonites then, and had both pledged themselves to the church. They left the Mennonite church a few years later, again because of my great grandfather, eventually becoming devout Christians, which they still are to this day.

My grandfather left the church because my great grandfather led most of his family to leave, except for one of my grandfather's brothers, who is still a Mennonite today, but is still close to the family. It was the same great grandfather who left the Amish church that questioned the Mennonite church so much he got kicked out. He just kept on reading the Bible and finding discrepancies within the teachings. He persisted in knowing the truth to the point that he was shunned by everyone in his family except for one sister. I am proud to have that sort of persistence for finding the truth in my heritage, even though it is sad that it cost my great grandfather so much.

The Mennonite church is very legalistic; even in less plain Mennonite churches, it is still a rampant problem. Legalism, in this case, refers to things that the Mennonite church commands its members

to do to be saved that are outside of what the Bible says is necessary for salvation. This includes lifestyle, outward appearance, and a bunch of other little things that a Mennonite has to do to become saved. My grandparents grew up following all of these trivial rules, and even though they left the Mennonite church, it still took years, even decades, to be comfortable with things that were considered normal in the rest of society.

Holidays were one of the many things that took time to become normal. Mennonites celebrate holidays like Christmas and Easter by having massive family gatherings with sometimes over a hundred people. They never participate in “worldly” traditions like Christmas lights, trees, and gift giving. So when my grandparents left the Mennonite church, they still did not celebrate a traditional Christmas, they just went to big family gatherings with lots of food. My mother never received gifts until she was about nine years old, and even then it wasn't quite what a family Christmas looked like for the traditional American family. My mother tells me about her first more traditional Christmas and how her mother made a fake fireplace out of cardboard boxes and white paper. They were not ready for a Christmas tree yet. That year, my mother and her four siblings received a stocking filled with a candy cane pen, some candy canes, an orange, erasers, and pencils. This all took place in the basement, away from any windows so their Mennonite neighbors would not see them celebrating a holiday in such a “worldly” and prideful manner. Despite this, it was still the best Christmas they had ever had. My mother was astonished that she actually got something. Easter was not quite the same though, and my mother never got to go on an Easter egg hunt as a child, something she made sure she did every year for my brother and I as we were growing up.

Clothing was another area on which Mennonite legalism had a long hold. My mother remembers having to wear skirts or dresses even at home until she was a few years into elementary school. Then she went from being able to wear pants to being able to wear jeans and finally shorts. She still remembers the exact moment when she was first allowed to wear shorts. Still, she had to wear dresses or skirts to church for a long time. She also went to a small Christian school that required girls to wear skirts, but was kind enough to let the girls wear sweatpants underneath during winter. She was not allowed to wear shorts to Crest Haven, the small local Mennonite

store, because my grandparents were worried about offending the Mennonites. My mother remembers, as a child, being concerned with the feelings of the Mennonites around her, because she was constantly told, "Well don't let the Mennonites see that" by her parents. This was due in part to the Mennonites that would come by their house and try to witness to my grandparents, trying to get them to come back to the church.

Sometimes, they would also leave tracts on the doorstep alluding that my grandparents were going to hell for what they were doing by leaving the church. Tracts are little pamphlets with the basics of a religion in them. My grandmother's mother even offered to help her leave her husband and take the kids because they thought my grandfather was leading her astray. Leaving the Mennonite church was a lot harder for my grandmother. She was told she was killing her mother by giving her heart problems because of her rebellion.

My mother's first memory of her parents breaking away from the Mennonite church is when her father made her mother take off her white, mesh head covering. These were worn by women to show submission to God and all men. The Mennonites are a very patriarchal group. My grandmother was not ready to take it off, but my grandfather forced her to. He admits now that he was a bit of a bully, and not just with the head covering thing. That was the moment my mother realized they were changing, although she does not recall ever going to a Mennonite church. But she remembers going to a new Christian church, a home church, made up of ex-Mennonites like my grandparents. Within the walls of those houses, the group rediscovered what the Bible said and what they believed by reading. This was the start of my mother's memory of breaking away from the legalism of the Mennonite church.

My mother grew up on a five-acre plot of land in rural Pennsylvania with a trailer where a house would stand a few years later. I've been there; my grandparents still live there to this day. It is farm country, so there are only a few neighbors close enough to walk to, and they were all Mennonite families, but now some of the houses have been sold to non-Mennonite families. The Mennonites do not shun ex-Mennonites like the Amish, so my mother grew up playing with the local Mennonite children. She tells me stories about ice skating and fishing in farm ponds on other people's property. No one around there cared if someone was on their property, as long

as they weren't destructive. She also tells me about going to the tiny Mennonite store called Crest Haven, not at all far from their property. I've been there, too. It is a tiny store filled with baked goods and crafts, as well as things that the owners bought in bulk and repackaged. It even has a small deli where people can buy sliced meat to make sandwiches. The best whoopie pies in all of Pennsylvania are sold there. I still remember when it was owned and run by local Mennonites, but it was bought out a few years ago by non-Mennonites. It is a community store, its products made by people from all over the community. My mother tells me about how her grandmother baked and sold the best pies there, and how her sister sold decorative hangers there, made by braiding scraps of fabric together and glueing them on. That's how my aunt saved to buy makeup, clothes, and even go to a small modeling school every Saturday, something her parents weren't happy about, especially my grandfather.

My aunt Jean was the driver for breaking away from the legalism she was growing up in. She is three years older than my mother, and the most rebellious out of the five. She is the second child. Clothing and makeup were the big ways she rebelled. She would buy makeup and clothes with the money she made at Crest Haven, and every time my grandfather would see her with makeup, he would make her wash it off. He thought his daughter was focused too much on her outward appearance, even though he made his family dress a certain way as not to appear too worldly. As she got older, my aunt Jean would go to parties and come home drunk, sometimes as late as three in the morning. My mother and my aunt also used to buy the teen magazines with posters inside, and they would hang the posters in their closet to hide them from my grandfather. My aunt's teen heartthrob was Rob Lowe, and she bought a *St. Elmo's Fire* poster, but my grandfather saw it and made her put it in the burn barrel. They still burn trash in rural Pennsylvania. He saw the poster as an idol, something completely unacceptable to his legalistic worldview. My aunt turned fifty recently, and my mother sent her a Rob Lowe poster and his life story as a joke. Both of them laughed over the phone about it. My mother then tells me about another time when she and her sister went to a fair and bought matching unicorn shirts. There was one problem though; they were all black except for the unicorn. My grandfather thought that black clothing

was for motorcycle gangs and made them put the shirts in the burn barrel. Now, my grandfather is a part of a Christian motorcycle gang and wears a black leather jacket and a black helmet whenever he rides. He now admits he was too harsh and a bit of a bully back then. My aunt also attended a modeling school when she was in her late teens. She paid for it herself and drove an hour every Saturday to Harrisburg to attend. She is embarrassed about it now, but it taught her how to do makeup, hair, and how to take care of her skin. My grandfather did not like that, but he came to her graduation where they showed pictures from a photoshoot and the students got to model and show what they learned. This furthered his worries that she was too focused on her outward appearance, another thing left over from the legalism of the Mennonite church.

The Mennonites are very concerned with looking humble and not prideful. They discourage standing out and individualism, even to the point of buying black or dark green cars, because every other color is seen as prideful, as if a parking lot full of black cars doesn't stand out. They "still reject modern-day church services that highlight the individual and emotional displays of joyfulness; instead they emphasize humility and close-knit community" (Loewen R., 18). They decline the "worldly" car and electronic media, the ease of electric devices, and town living. They are so proud of their humility. Even the worship cannot have instruments because those are seen as loud and flashy, and ultimately prideful.

As I continue to talk with my mother, the topic of what it means to be a Mennonite woman comes up. Mennonite women are some of the kindest people on the planet. They always strive to make their homes full of "kindness that exceeded ordinary bounds, a concern for the happiness of others, as though life depended on her expression of optimism" (Loewen M., 14). There is an old story that has been passed around my family for years about a Mennonite woman who struggled with depression and found happiness by baking and giving to the poor. I first heard this story while having dinner at a Mennonite family's house out in Bakersfield, California. I don't remember how I am related to them, as my extended family is quite large. It was accompanied by the statement that the best way to help yourself is to help others. Mennonite women are also expected to feed people, even if they did not invite them over. It was common for Mennonite families to show up at friend's or family's houses

unannounced and expect to be fed. This was even still a common thing among ex-Mennonites. My mother tells me stories about how on Sunday afternoons the entire family would go on drives and show up at a friend's or family's house and just be fed. The same thing would happen to them, too, sometimes.

The women in the Mennonite church are also very industrious. My mother brings up her grandmother, who was one of the best bakers for Crest Haven. Also, at the family reunions with over a hundred people, there was never a shortage of food. If there's one thing the Mennonite women know how to do, it's feed a large group of people. Most of the time they did not even know how many people were coming because all of the people invited would invite people themselves. This is part of the reason my grandmother got a job at an assisted living facility preparing food and planning meals. She did that for many years and was very successful. Mennonite women also grow some of their own food and help on the farm if needed. They are able to jump in anywhere and be useful. They are still expected to have lots of kids; that's how the men in the community see them. Large families are very common in the Mennonite community, since birth control is taboo and discouraged, put on par with abortion in their eyes. My grandmother was one of eighteen children. Most of them stayed Mennonite after she left the church. I remember all the Burkholder (my grandmother's maiden name) recipes passed down to my mother and how they all yield way more than my family of four could eat. Mennonite women were also expected to marry fairly young, around twenty-one; if she were twenty-five and still not married, everyone would be a bit worried.

The Mennonite women are also incredible artists. They learn how to sew, embroider, and quilt from a young age. My grandmother is an incredible crafter and painter. She even taught an art class at my mother's school for a few years. She was taught to do all these things from a young age, and more importantly how to be creative with what is around her. The Mennonites also have gatherings where they will all quilt together and make a beautiful piece of art. The worship songs are all acapella and the music and singing ability of the Mennonite choirs, men and women included, is amazing. My mother was given a single quilt from her grandmother when she was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. It was a single quilt because she did not marry until she was almost twenty-seven,

and her grandmother died before then. She still has that quilt in our music room; it truly is a work of art.

Because the Mennonites believe in teaching their children farming and home-making, traditional school is discouraged for all Mennonites, especially girls. Most Mennonites only have up to an eighth-grade education because that is what the law mandates. After that, the girls go home to learn home arts and get ready to be married, and the boys learn how to farm successfully. Like my aunt Jean, my mother had a rebellion, too, but in a much different way. My mother worked hard in school and got into a good college, which was something that was looked down upon by my grandfather. It was not until she was working on her master's degree that he came around to accepting the idea of her getting a higher education. This made me think of my own schooling. I went to a private, conservative Christian school my entire life, just like my mother did for most of her schooling. It was not until she mentioned how she was not pushed as hard as the boys, especially in math and science, that I realized the same thing had happened to me, it just was not as obvious. My school had an accelerated math program for kids who did very well in math. I did not realize that it was only boys who were put in that program, even if there were girls with higher test scores in math. I was also blatantly told in middle school several times that boys were just better at math and science, and girls were just better at English. I did not realize that I could be good at math until my Algebra II teacher started talking about a woman in one of his graduate level physics classes that was the best person at math he had ever seen. This is the part of my mother's story that I truly identify with, because I, too, overcame the stigma that women are better uneducated by eventually having one of the highest grades in my high school Calculus and Physics classes. I also was subjected to the legalism of my school, though it looked different than what my mother had endured.

Along with getting a good education, my mother also rebelled by not getting married until she was almost twenty-seven, something that scared my grandparents a bit. She also dated a black boy for a while, something that was taboo not to the Mennonites, but to the majority of the small rural town she lived in. He was the only black kid in the entire school, adopted by a white family. Historically, before the Civil War, "Mennonites were also opposed

to slavery, a position that, if it did not make them entirely unique in the slave-based economy of the South, certainly placed them outside the mainstream" (Lehman, 3). The Mennonites call for unity and racial equality, but they are still a predominantly white religion, so the racist tendencies come from a lack of exposure to diversity instead of a belief. Regardless of this, Mennonites are still very welcoming of people who are outside of their religion, often welcoming non-Mennonite people into their church services with open arms.

Now, my grandparents are a lot less legalistic. My grandfather wears jeans to church and rides a motorcycle. He sings loudly during worship along with the many instruments, and I even saw him raise his hands once, something that is forbidden in the Mennonite worship. My grandmother hardly wears skirts anymore and is comfortable in a regular bathing suit, as opposed to the cape dresses made out of swimsuit material that the Mennonites would swim in. Also, my aunt is now married to a black man, and my grandparents are supportive of their whole family. There are aspects of their lives that legalism still affects, like the idea of having to go to church every time they hold a service. They still hold very conservative religious and political views, but understand that political stance is not an issue of whether or not someone is saved. They have gotten to the point where the legalisms they hold on to are not harmful to the people around them.

My mother also made it a point to say that she tried her hardest to keep the legalism that she grew up in out of my brother and I's life. We celebrate Christmas, Easter, and even Halloween, something my mother was not able to do. She is still very conscious of legalism, even though the legalism in our current non-denominational Christian church is nowhere near the levels of legalism in the Amish and Mennonite churches. My mother even goes so far as to call the Amish church, and some Mennonite churches, cults because of the way the focus is on the outward appearance and not on the inward relationship with God.

She calls them cults because of the many problems with adding things to the Bible, the belief that men are superior to women, and their pride in outward appearance. Now, I know I need to be wary whenever someone discourages me from doing my own research, just like how my great grandfather was discouraged from reading the very book he was supposed to be following. It is very easy to fall into

letting someone else think for you, because it is easier than forming your own thoughts. I am continuing my mother's break away from legalism, and am trying everyday to make sure that my worldview lines up with how the world really works.

Author Bio

Kaitlin Roetcisoender is a student at CSUMB. This essay was written as part of a first-year composition course.

Artist Statement

***Grow From Within* by Megan Goodwin**

Growth has been a recurring theme for myself for this past year. For this piece I used recycled materials to depict an environment where there was a muddled line between nature and the indoors, and in a way physically show the scene "growing from within." This piece delves into introspection and inner growth/healing.

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