The Amish Way

Patient Faith in a Perilous World

DONALD B. KRAYBILL
STEVEN M. NOLT
DAVID L. WEAVER-ZERCHER

Authors of the National Bestseller
Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy

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JOSSEY-BASS
A Wiley Imprint
www.josseybass.com

Published by Jossey-Bass
A Wiley Imprint
989 Market Street, San Francisco, CA 94103-1741—www.josseybass.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kraybill, Donald B.
The Amish way : patient faith in a perilous world / Donald B. Kraybill, Steven M. Nolt, David L. Weaver-Zercher.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-470-52069-7 (hardback); 978-0-470-89087-5 (ebk); 978-0-470-89088-2 (ebk); 978-0-470-89097-4 (ebk)
1. Amish. 2. Spirituality—Amish. I. Nolt, Steven M., date. II. Weaver-Zercher, David, date. III. Title.
BX8121.3.K73 2010
248.4'897—dc22
2010021302

Printed in the United States of America
FIRST EDITION
HB Printing 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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PREFACE

On October 2, 2006, the unthinkable took place in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. On a crystal-clear Monday morning, a thirty-two-year-old milk truck driver armed with guns and ammunition entered a one-room Amish school. Embittered by the death of his infant daughter nine years earlier, he was determined to get even with God in a most gruesome way. After sending the boys out of the school, the gunman tied up the remaining children—ten girls, ages six through thirteen—and opened fire in execution style. Moments later, five girls lay dying, the rest had been seriously wounded, and the intruder had killed himself. One Amish leader, searching for words to describe the horror to his non-Amish neighbors, said simply, "This was our 9/11."

Although millions around the world were stunned that such evil could transpire in an Amish school, many were even more surprised when the Amish community, within hours, extended grace and forgiveness to the killer and his family. *How could anyone do what the Amish did, and do it as quickly as they did?*

This was the question we addressed in *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy*. In writing that book, we interviewed dozens of Amish people and read scores of Amish publications, and we soon discovered that forgiveness is embedded more deeply in Amish life than we ever suspected. That realization inspired us to listen more closely for the religious heartbeat that sustains their entire way of life. This pulse, which often goes unnoticed, is more fundamental to the Amish way than the buggies and bonnets that receive so much attention. Strong but subtle, quiet yet persistent, this heartbeat is *Amish spirituality*.

One Braid, Three Strands

Defining spirituality is no easy task, but it involves at least three aspects: religious beliefs, practices, and affections.[1] By *religious beliefs* we mean how people understand and make sense of their world. Is the world inhabited by a supernatural power? If so, is this power a wise old man in the sky or a mysterious force in nature? Do angels wing their way through space to protect us, or does help arrive in more ordinary ways? Religious beliefs are sometimes expressed in logical, doctrinal statements, though many people find stories and images more helpful in articulating what they believe. Whatever form they take—creeds or parables, statements or stories—religious beliefs encompass what believers hold to be true.

These beliefs do not merely exist in people's minds, however. They take concrete shape through *religious practices*. Attending services, praying, singing, and helping others—these acts are more visible than beliefs but are tied to them in profound ways. In fact, religious practices both flow from and create religious beliefs. Consider the nonspiritual example of teeth-brushing. Parents make their children brush their teeth because they have strong views about oral hygiene and because they want their children to embrace those views. And although it may take many years, children who regularly brush their teeth will usually come to own their parents' beliefs on hygiene. Similarly, spiritual practices, both private and public ones, nurture a particular religious vision.

This vision generates *religious affections*, desires of the heart. All human beings have desires or impulses that drive them to act in certain ways. Most religions view some of these personal desires as misplaced, or at least out of balance. One of the chief aims of religion is to redirect people's affections, to help them desire the right things. In many religious traditions, including the Amish way, the primary goal is to nurture religious affections for God and the things that please God. Doing so often requires reducing desires for temporal things—perhaps even good ones.

Throughout this book we move back and forth among beliefs, practices, and affections. Sometimes we focus on Amish beliefs, sometimes on their practices, and other times on their affections. Ultimately, we see this trio as three strands of one braid that secures the entire Amish way. In other words, the spirituality of Amish people is not something that stands on its own, apart from their daily lives as mothers and fathers, farmers and carpenters, ministers and laypeople. Rather, their spirituality gives them a framework for making decisions about marriage, family, work, and play—indeed, a framework that helps them face all the pleasures and uncertainties that human life entails.

Patient Faith in a Perilous World

Most forms of spirituality promise resources for facing dangers. Whether these perils are physical, emotional, or moral, many people search earnestly for help beyond themselves. For many of them, this search leads to God, who according to the Judeo-Christian tradition is "a very present help in trouble" (Psalm 46:1). As Christians, the Amish look to God for help, even though, as we will see, some of the perils they seek to avoid are quite different from those identified by other Christians.

And Amish people demonstrate uncommon patience as they make their way in a perilous world. They do not skip from one thing to the next, but stick with traditional answers and approaches. When they are faced with problems, their first instinct is to wait and pray rather than seek a quick fix. Indeed, "the quick solution, the simple method, and the rapid cure" that characterize "our instant age" are dangerous, says one Amish church leader.[2] Demanding immediate solutions signals a lack of trust in God, and, in their view, patience is the best way to show acceptance of God's timing.

We find this commitment to patience fascinating and admirable, but also disconcerting. Although the three of us respect the religious

views of the Amish on many levels, we have never been tempted to become Amish, in part because their patient approach runs counter to some of our deepest sensibilities. Is this much patience a good thing? What about working to change the world for the better? As Martin Luther King Jr. wrote in his book *Why We Can't Wait*, impatience is sometimes a virtue, for "progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability."[3] Amish people are not patient in every way, of course, and they do nurture good even as they wait. Still, they reject the activist approach to tackling the world's problems. Activism—trying to change the world—is simply not the Amish way.

Although changing the world is not the Amish way, resisting the world is. All forms of spirituality are acts of resistance in some respect—resistance to despair or fear, for example—but most forms of spirituality do not resist the world as forcefully as the Amish do.

What the Amish seek to do, perhaps more than any religious community in North America, is to create a society in which members learn to resist the world's allures and desire the things of God. You could call it a counterculture of religious affection, but the Amish call it "separation from the world." It's a way of life based on the teachings of Jesus who, in his Sermon on the Mount, reminded his followers that no one can serve two masters. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God," Jesus said, and God will provide for your needs (Matthew 6:33). In other words, set your desires on spiritual priorities and you will have nothing to fear, even in a perilous world.

Looking Ahead

Rooted in the teachings of Jesus, Amish spirituality is a Christian vision, but one with a difference. In Part One of this book, "Searching for

Amish Spirituality," we highlight some distinctive aspects of their religious life, but also place it in the wider spectrum of Christianity.

In Part Two, "The Amish Way of Community," we explore the beliefs and practices that undergird the collective life of the Amish: giving up self-will, joining the church, worship and prayer, mutual aid, and church discipline. As we'll see, some of these spiritual practices are severe and uncompromising, reminding us that resistance always has a cost.

In "The Amish Way in Everyday Life," Part Three, we consider matters that face many humans—child rearing, family life, material possessions, the natural world, evil, and sorrow. For Amish people, these issues pose both problems and possibilities. We don't suggest that the Amish way is the best way to navigate these situations, but in Part Four we do ask, Is there anything the Amish can teach the rest of us about living meaningfully in the modern world? Although that question is complicated, we answer with a qualified yes.

We talked with a host of Amish people in the course of writing this book, and we quote many of them in the following pages. Because Amish culture emphasizes humility, the people we interviewed did not want their names to appear in print. We have respected their wishes and simply cite many of our sources as "an Amish mother," "an Amish minister," and so on. For the people we quote most often, we use typical Amish first names (Sadie, Reuben, Jesse) as pseudonyms. Each pseudonym refers to a real person, not a composite of several individuals. We have also assigned pseudonyms to some Amish authors who published their works anonymously. Otherwise we use the real names of Amish people who have already been identified in the mainstream media or

use their own names when publishing articles, essays, or books for Amish readers. In the endnotes we cite the written sources we quote, but not the interviews.

It is risky to make sweeping statements about *the* Amish way of life, for there are some eighteen hundred individual congregations and over forty subgroups of Amish, and they have no central organization or governing body. The practices of these subgroups and local congregations vary in many ways. For example, reading habits and the amount of daily interaction with non-Amish neighbors vary, as does use of technology. Some households have indoor plumbing, cut their grass with gasoline-powered lawnmowers, and fasten LED lights to their buggies for nighttime driving. Other congregations permit none of these things. Because we do not have space to examine these diverse details, we have focused on the most typical themes and practices.

The Amish Way

Part I

Searching for Amish Spirituality

CHAPTER ONE

A Peculiar Way

. . . in the Bible we find that God's people are to be peculiar.

—Amish leader[1]

Here's an idea for a slow Saturday night: ask your friends to call out the first words they think of when you say the word *Amish*. You might exhaust the usual suspects fairly quickly—horses and buggies, bonnets and beards, barn raisings, quilts, and plain clothes. Your group might settle on some adjectives: *gentle, simple, peaceful*, and *forgiving*. Then again, you might come up with words that lean in another direction: *severe, harsh, judgmental*, and *unfriendly*. The range of adjectives probably reflects the variety in Amish life—in any kind of life, for that matter. More likely, however, the differences reflect your point of view and the features of Amish life that capture your gaze.

Although the Amish are sometimes called a simple people, their religious practices are often mystifying, and their way of life—like all ways of life—is quite complex. It's no wonder outsiders hold conflicting views of the Amish, for the Amish are at once submissive and defiant, yielding and yet unmoved. To use a common Amish phrase, one

we will explore more fully in later chapters, they are ready to "give up," but they do not readily give in.

These apparent paradoxes make the Amish hard to understand. They also make them enormously fascinating, the subjects of countless books, films, Web sites, and tourist venues.[2] In this chapter, we introduce some of the unique and distinctively religious elements of Amish society. We do this by offering nine vignettes illustrating aspects of Amish faith that rarely receive media attention but that nonetheless go to the heart of the Amish way. Together these stories demonstrate how the spirituality of Amish people leads them to do very intriguing—and what some would call very *peculiar*—things.

A Homespun Scholar

A few years ago we visited one of our Amish friends in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, an older man who has since passed away. Abner was a bookbinder by trade, repairing the old or tattered books that people brought to him. He was also an amateur historian who founded a local Amish library. A warm and engaging person, Abner had many "English" (non-Amish) friends stopping by to visit.

One summer evening, sitting on lawn chairs, we talked about our families. "So where do your brothers and sisters live?" he asked, and we ran down the list: one lives near San Francisco, another in New Hampshire, and still another in northern Indiana. "Come with me," Abner said, and he led us around his house and into his backyard. His simple house backed up to the edge of a ridge, giving him an expansive view of farmland to the north. "Let me show you where my family lives," he said, pointing across the landscape. "My one sister lives there, and another right over there. And you see that road? I have five more relatives living along there." And with a sweep of his hand Abner showed

us the homes of his fellow church members as well. "This is one of the things I like about being Amish," he said, and we stood quietly for a moment as we surveyed the fields and homes of his kin.

Abner didn't have to say more to make his message clear: the choices we had made as scholars, and the choices our siblings had made as professionals, had pulled our families apart, geographically and in other ways as well. Abner was a scholar too, of course, and we often asked him questions about Amish history. But his way of being a scholar didn't require moving across the country to pursue a Ph.D. In fact, pursuing that sort of life is forbidden for the Amish, who end their formal education at eighth grade.* Thus, for Abner, becoming a historian meant reading books in his spare time and asking lots of questions.

Abner clearly enjoyed talking with non-Amish people. Could it be that he lived vicariously through his educated non-Amish friends? Perhaps his backyard commentary that evening was a way of reminding himself, as well as us, that Amish life had its advantages. Still, if there was a message from that evening, it was this: our way of living, just like Abner's, comes at a cost.

Unwilling Warriors

In late 1953, two Amish men entered a federal courtroom in Des Moines, Iowa. Both in their early twenties, Melvin Chupp and Emanuel Miller showed up "wearing the beards and unbarbered hair traditional in their sect," according to the local newspaper.[3] A few hours later, they left with three-year prison terms for refusing to serve in the U.S. military.

*The Amish believe that eight grades of formal education, supplemented by vocational training, are sufficient to live a productive life. In 1972 the U.S. Supreme Court in *Wisconsin* v. *Yoder* permitted Amish people to end formal schooling at fourteen years of age. Appendix I provides more detail on Amish life and practice.

Melvin and Emanuel, like all members of their faith, viewed war as wrong and participation in it sinful. Although the federal government allowed war objectors to do alternate service outside the military, knowledge of this alternative apparently had not trickled down to the draft board in Buchanan County, Iowa. Rather than granting the two Amish men conscientious objector status, the draft board required them to do noncombatant service in the military. When Melvin and Emanuel refused that, the board ordered them into combat units. Once again they refused, which quickly led to their arrest.

At the trial, Melvin acted as his own attorney. His only statement came during closing arguments. He might have appealed to principles in the U.S. Constitution, but instead he focused on his Christian convictions. "Jesus never killed His enemies. He let his enemies kill Him," Melvin said. "Therefore, I'm here to *give myself up* to the jury." The judge who sentenced them to prison was not sympathetic. His only regret, he said, was that the two Amish men "found it impossible to accept noncombatant service." Melvin and Emanuel's decision to place faith above patriotism cost them three years of their lives.

A Church-First Businesswoman

Sadie is an enterprising businesswoman. In the early 1980s she started a dry goods store. Under her management, the business grew rapidly, adding new divisions and product lines and eventually selling everything from bulk foods to hardware. Sadie opened stores in several other locations, and altogether spawned eight retail businesses, including a shoe store and two grocery stores. Aware of her success, Sadie is nonetheless quick to deflect credit. "I think some people are just born with it," she told us. "I have this love of selling."

At first glance, her business model seems to track a Fortune 500 company: start a small business, expand into larger markets, reinvest the profits, and expand some more. But Sadie's story didn't follow that model. As an Amish businessperson, she faced restrictions. Her church frowns on members accumulating wealth or making "a big name for themselves." As one Amish person explained, "Bigness ruins everything."

So as Sadie's business grew, she sold off some of her product lines and stores to her employees, keeping her own holdings small. Sadie's plan spread the wealth and multiplied the number of owners within the Amish community.

Her decision to shrink her business did not come easily. She knew that she would earn less this way, and money was a concern for her family. In fact, she had first gone into business because she had special-needs children with significant medical costs. In the end, however, she concluded that the perils of growing her business and risking church censure were greater than the risks of downsizing.

A Reluctant Minister

Reuben is a thirty-two-year-old stonemason and father of three. He is also one of two ministers in his local congregation of about thirty families, but he never applied for the job or went to seminary. During a recent visit he explained how he had been selected by God to serve as a minister for the rest of his life.

As they hitched up their buggies and drove their families to church on the day of the ordination, Reuben and the other men in his congregation keenly felt the burden of knowing that they might be selected. Reuben explained that a man would never seek such a position and women are not eligible. Instead, by drawing lots, a method used by

Jesus' disciples to fill a vacancy in their ranks (Acts 1:12–26), the Amish believe that God miraculously selects ministers for them.*

We'll look more closely at this process in Chapter Four, but one of the most peculiar aspects to outsiders is that neither the nominees for the position nor the chosen one have the option to decline. When it suddenly became clear that he was selected, Reuben remembers having "a feeling of being between complete surrender and stepping out on the ice and not being sure how thick it was." The bishop immediately ordained Reuben for his new, lifelong position, and the entire process was over in less than ninety minutes.

During those minutes, the lives of Reuben and his family were changed forever. Reuben felt a heavy burden to help lead the congregation, and his family felt a new expectation to live exemplary Amish lives. Without the benefit of pay or formal training, and without the option to say no, Reuben soon began preaching sermons, counseling members, and helping resolve disputes—all in addition to his regular work as a mason. Rather than a time of celebration, an ordination is a somber, weighty occasion. "It's no 'Hurray!' type of thing," said a friend of Reuben's, a man who has been in the lot three times but never selected. "You would serve to the best of your ability if called, but you are also very grateful to take your usual seat again if another person is chosen."

A Self-Taught Artist

Susie Riehl, a Pennsylvania artist whose work can sell for more than $3,000, has never taken an art class. This Amish mother of five who paints watercolors featuring quilts, gardens, buggies, and barns is

*This procedure has traditionally been called *casting lots*; however, throughout the text we use the term *drawing lots* to describe the process.

finding ways to live within the constraints of her church while pursuing her artistic passions.

Although various types of folk art have long been accepted, the Amish church frowns on members showcasing their paintings at art shows, fearing it will lead to pride on the part of the artist. The church considers photographs and drawings of human faces taboo, a violation of the Second Commandment's prohibition of idols known as graven images (Exodus 20:4).

Susie honors the church's wishes by not appearing at public exhibitions of her artwork and by not drawing human faces. When children or even dolls appear in her work, they are faceless. "I don't want people to think I've lost my humility," she told a *USA Today* reporter. "I'm just working with a God-given talent and enjoying myself."[4]

A Would-Be Violinist

One of our friends, Nancy Fisher Outley, describes her Amish childhood as a happy time, especially the trips to town with her mother as she sold vegetables door-to-door. "I remember thoroughly enjoying those excursions, listening to my mother discuss an array of issues with her customers and friends," she says. Nancy felt "an overwhelming heaviness," however, when she entered the eighth grade, the end of formal schooling for Amish children.

Intentionally or not, Nancy's family had given her a "thirst for knowledge," fostered by books, magazines, and her mother's "keen curiosity and interest in world affairs." As a girl, she had fantasies about becoming a teacher or even a concert violinist. "I practiced a lot on my imaginary violin out behind the chicken house," she told us. Eventually she set her fantasies aside, and after finishing the eighth grade, started