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## FOR THE LOVE OF PARADOX: MENNONITE MORALITY AND PHILOSOPHY

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Either ethics makes no sense at all, or this is what it means . . . not to be unworthy of what happens to us.

—Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*

The Russian Mennonite community in which I was raised during the 1960s and 1970s shared a past that we children absorbed like the humid air of our southern Ontario summers.<sup>1</sup> The stories that emerged in fragments at family gatherings did not seem out of the ordinary. We assumed, with the indifferent innocence of children, that all families had such stories to tell—of refugee compounds, labor camps, curfews, and dramatic escapes to freedom. Some words opened a vast silence with their chill—Siberia, communism, Makhno—but only much later did we grasp the significance of the grim faces in faded photographs, sudden emotion escaping a stoic eye, and the stern disapproval of frivolity.

Most of the older members of our church had been born in the Soviet Union, descendants of the Mennonites Catherine the Great invited from Prussia to farm the fertile land of Ukraine in the late eighteenth century. This they did with great success—a success they could not know would seal their fates when Stalin began the collectivization of farms and instigated the purges responsible for the death and destruction of the 1930s and 1940s. It was a terrible page of history, with stories not unlike other twentieth-century episodes of violent repression—telling of murder and rape, dispossession and flight, poverty, illness, and starvation. In the end, those who managed to escape to Germany and from there to Paraguay, Canada, or the United States

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were immeasurably more fortunate than those who chose to retreat in the opposite direction, many of whom died miserably of hunger and exposure.

Why is the legacy of such a past a collective moral attitude characterized in part by intolerance, exclusivity, hypocrisy, and self-righteousness? For while the Mennonites are known internationally for their pacifism and humanitarian aid,<sup>2</sup> and their work for global peace and social justice, at the level of everyday life in small communities a dogmatic adherence to the centuries-old edict of separating oneself from the world and all that is considered worldly prevails. An obsession with purity ensues: with the pure body, which admits the body of the other only under the proper conditions of marriage and within the bounds of community; the pure community, founded on blood ties and the acceptance of the moral authority of the church; and the pure mind or soul, uncontaminated either by desire or passion—of a sexual or intellectual nature—and motivated by an unquestioning obedience to the will of God. It is an obedience—*all we like sheep*—fundamentally at odds with philosophical inquiry.

The moral world of the Mennonite faith I fervently embraced as a girl was a narrow place. It did not permit exceptions or admit paradoxical predicaments without solutions, and fostered a community of judgment and punishment that I have spent years fleeing, both literally and figuratively. It provided only black and white platitudes that could not equip me to deal with the ethical questions raised by violence, revolution, and oppression despite, the fact that these phenomena weighed heavily on our consciousness as a community. My flight from moral absolutes and the prohibition of dissent eventually propelled me to those European thinkers of the twentieth century who were also haunted by violent political events. They wondered how to speak of ethics after Auschwitz, how to understand community beyond an inclusive/exclusive binary, and how to rethink politics after totalitarianism. These have become my questions. To get to a place where I could ask them, and could think about them philosophically, however, I first had to reject the faith and community that provided me with meaning for the first twenty years of my life.<sup>3</sup> I left the Mennonite world in order to discover the “foreign”—the material alterity manifest in dissent and critique that we were not allowed to encounter or indulge—and for the love of paradox, the kind of paradox we cannot live without morally or politically. The religion I embraced could neither admit nor negotiate this paradox.

In this chapter I will describe the stringent limitations on thought that the Mennonite faith imposed, as well as the tiny cracks in the edifice that enabled me—slowly and at some sacrifice—to extricate myself from these

constraints. That the activity of critical, philosophical reflection itself was considered dangerous for Mennonites, at least in the time and place in which I lived as one, posed a formidable obstacle for anyone who indulged an intellectually curious spirit. The consequences of a moral authority that prevents thinking in the name of securing one's faith are debilitating, for such an authority prohibits the trust in one's own moral intuition and response—substituting blind adherence to rules for the compassion and critical deliberation that is required of us in our relations with others. In the process of this exploration, I will reflect on how the residues of such a profound experience have affected my own thinking: inescapable conflicts or tensions that inadvertently arise, often between the lines; ghosts that haunt and drive my interests; a keen sense of justice and an anxiety regarding violence that propels me toward questions of politics and ethics; and finally, an ongoing struggle—despite having left the Mennonite Church some twenty years ago—to forge my own path as a woman with a penchant for philosophical inquiry and political critique. In the process I hope to demonstrate the necessity of rethinking our ethical and political ideals. There are other ways of cultivating a community bound together by compassion and justice, and we need to find them.

### The Question

As an ethnic group, the Russian Mennonites have traditionally been marked by a pronounced schism between intellectual interests and an extremely practical bent, a schism my own family embodied rather well. My paternal great grandfather was an exceptional businessman in Ukraine, responsible for railroad construction and flour mills, whose son became a farmer in the new country, passing on his skills, land, and ambition in turn to my father, who took charge of their small farm at the age of fourteen and turned it into a successful major business operation. Philosophical pursuits—from the perspective of Mennonite farmers who live and breathe a pragmatic stoicism that renders the Protestant work ethic mere child's play—are far beyond anything that could be recognized as legitimate “work.” Furthermore, to *question*—as I was repeatedly instructed by my church community—was to doubt God's omnipotence and gift of grace.

It was my mother who dared to open Pandora's box and let fly the demons of philosophical thinking. Her family represented the Mennonite predilection for book-learning and teaching. My mother's grandfather was a professor

of German literature and a religious leader, eventually imprisoned during the worst of the Stalin purges, and executed in 1941 (although this was not known until decades later). His letters from various prisons or camps—Butyrka, Lubyanka, Solovetsky—urged his children, who he did not know were barely getting enough to eat, to be diligent in their studies. Only one of his sons was fortunate enough to be able to pursue an education. But the turbulence of the time, the experience of flight, imprisonment, and torture alongside his father, took a heavy toll on this great-uncle of mine. Becoming ill while a student in Göttingen after the war, he left for Canada in 1962, spending the rest of his life in the care of my grandparents, forever imprisoned by his schizophrenic terror of the Russian communists he believed were watching him. It is his response to trauma that haunts me now as I contemplate the psychic and political effects of a community's experience of violence and explore the process of survival.

The split embodied in my own family led to unusual departures from the Mennonite culture in which I was raised. While in the church pews we listened without speaking, trusting a faith that prohibited doubt, at home an inquiring mind was encouraged (within certain acceptable political parameters). My mother would frequently leave the table to consult an encyclopedia or dictionary for answers to our unresolved dinner arguments. Her passion for debate and her enthusiasm for learning were irrepressible. When my younger brother, her fourth child, entered school, my mother decided to pursue a university education despite the protests of my pragmatic and old-fashioned father. She would come home from her philosophy class animated in a manner we could not then understand, and ask us a startling question: are we really humans dreaming we are butterflies or butterflies dreaming we are humans? Years later in my own first philosophy class, this inversion of reality remained thrilling, as though turning the world as we understand it upside down and suspending all judgments and presuppositions in order to  *dwell in the question* , as Gilles Deleuze would put it, were the very indispensable task of philosophy.

My father's pragmatic approach to life was also enabling in ways I could not know at the time. His intolerance of hypocrisy and the underhanded business practices of some of the Mennonites in our community was the subject of many dinner-hour diatribes. His difficulty accepting bell-bottom jeans or long hair on young men when they came into fashion, and his vehement arguments with me against "women's libbers," organic farming, and the welfare system were signs of the inflexible, conservative politics I rebelled against, but his intolerance of those who prayed fervently on Sunday

and engaged in suspect business dealings on Monday thankfully immunized us against the belief that was otherwise easily absorbed: that Mennonites were God's chosen people. My father taught me the meaning of integrity, which he would argue now had nothing to do with growing up Mennonite, but he also conveyed the importance of "suspicion." He would laugh to hear me say it, but it is a suspicion that has much in common with an attitude underlying the work of my most-loved philosophers.

To dwell in the uncertainty of the question, let alone summon the courage to express it in the first place, was for a Mennonite girl in my time and place a radical, heretical act. I showed no signs of acquiring such a voice as a young emotionally impressionable girl in a Mennonite high school, intense about all my pursuits and therefore, not surprisingly, utterly devoted to discovering God's will for my life—a God whose image occupied my thoughts constantly, a transcendent other whom I imagined to be listening to all the longings of my heart. An aura of the forbidden enshrouded the question, somewhat akin to the mystery surrounding sex. Somewhere around the age of ten I innocently asked my Sunday school teacher what "circumcision" meant, having encountered the term in a Bible passage. Visibly flustered, eyes to the floor, she quietly told us to ask our parents. I did so, naturally, while they sat in the family room, my father watching television, my mother reading, and suffered that bald shame of exposure on hearing the words "penis" and "foreskin" in front of my father, who fixed his gaze on the television throughout the brief ordeal. I decided not to ask what a foreskin was.

A philosophical question evoked a similar sense of the forbidden (if not the shameful). C. S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters* made a significant impression on me as a teenager. The fact that a demon—in my mind, Satan—was constantly introducing questions and doubts in our minds, whittling away persistently at our fragile faiths, caused more than a little torment when indulging in the act of reflection. Indeed, it was a powerful disincentive for thinking at all, for one was always wondering whether it was God or Satan who introduced thoughts into our minds. The only way to tell was to submit blindly to the moral grid imposed on every facet of our lives: anything to do with sexual desire was being introduced by Satan; anything that made us doubt the omnipresence or omniscience of God, the authority of the Bible and of the pastor who told us how to interpret it, the wisdom of the Sunday School teacher, and the good intentions of our parents, came from Satan. For a serious, introspective teenager, this spelled a schizoid existence: a hatred of the body, distrust of the mind, fear of desire, profound suspicion of one's own emotions and intuition, and implicit trust in church leaders—

the elderly men who were supposedly shepherding the flock on our meek and obedient way to the Kingdom of God.

It is this conflict between blind obedience and trust in oneself, and between the “dangerous” flesh of the body and the rational workings of the mind, that manifested itself in one particularly heinous manner in my teenage years, although I did not hear of it until sixteen years after I had left the church. At a cousin’s wedding reception I was informed by an old acquaintance from the youth group to which I belonged during high school that two of my close friends at that time—girls with whom I had planned social events, Bible studies, singing engagements, and youth retreats—had been subjected to repeated sexual assaults during the very years we knew each other. Both were victimized over a number of years, one by an uncle, the other by a well-respected youth minister whom we admired and trusted implicitly to be accomplishing God’s work.

In the weeks after hearing this tragic news I agonized over my memories of conversations with these friends, wondering how I could not have known, how anyone could not have known, and how it could happen that youth learn to mistrust their own perceptions, learn to keep silent about torment and violation. While no community is without betrayal, and the victimization of its most vulnerable members, there is something particularly twisted about the violence that occurs in the name of God, and about a moral system that unintentionally solicits such silence. I don’t know what the knowledge of these crimes would have done to my faith had I known about them as they were occurring; in hindsight they confirmed what I have learned in the years since: that there is no good without the taint of evil, no inside without an encounter with the outside, no holy without the unholy. This is what renders ethics far too complex for moral templates such as the one we were given as Mennonite children.

### The World

The beginning of my extrication from the stifling conformism of my community and its prohibition of questioning ironically occurred at a Mennonite Bible College in Manitoba. It was a school to which the people of my church were afraid to send their children, for they often returned seriously confused if they returned at all.<sup>4</sup> While many suffered from the doubt introduced by higher education for a brief, tormenting period and then returned to the security and comfort of the fold with relief and resignation, I was among

those few who never returned. The first crack in the foundation of my faith came in the form of an exegetical exploration of biblical and sacred texts—examining their inclusion or exclusion from the canon, their multiple translations, omissions, and errors, as well as their infinite interpretations—that eroded any vision of God breathing words into the writing instruments of his prophets and disciples. Though it entailed a painful, irrevocable loss—not only of my community but of all that had given a deep and satisfying meaning to my existence—there was no turning back after experiencing what I did not recognize at the time to be an introduction to philosophical inquiry.

A particularly astute and intrepid professor taught an inspiring course on the letters of Paul that introduced me to the marvelous world of hermeneutics. I did not realize at the time that the excitement of looking up passages in the original Greek and finding inconsistencies in translated texts or blatant omissions (not without their political import) would be the catalyst for leaving the Mennonite Church and the God I had loved. Most significant, it sparked an interest in the historical contingency of texts and ideas, and concern with the human tendency to crave certitude and absolutes in the face of the indeterminacy of quotidian life. Ironically, “Letters of Paul” was the only course I ever failed, having suddenly decided to exchange my books for a backpack. The disembodied “ivory tower” nature of higher education and what I perceived to be an attitude of self-righteousness and academic arrogance became intolerable for me that spring of 1983. I vowed never to return to an academic institution.

It was still a long time before I would find my way to the philosophical texts that changed my life and to the parallel operation of extricating myself from the moralism of my Mennonite upbringing. My faith had already been seriously undermined by a historical and scholarly reading of biblical texts, but it was ultimately my encounter with other equally fervent faiths and diverse ways of life while traveling in North America, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, and Asia for months at a time over several years that enabled me to say finally that I did not believe in the God or morality of my childhood. It was not a matter of refuting arguments for the existence of God and rationalizing away my belief system. It was my encounter with the *world*—that world we had been taught to distrust and even to despise because it was fallen and imperfect, full of the evil we had to fight to keep at bay. I discovered this world with breath-taking surprise and childlike fearlessness. There was beauty and goodness in the family from Iowa who took me and my traveling companion in for a weekend while hitchhiking to Latin America; in the cheerful Hispanic farmer who drove us forty miles out of his way

to show us a raisin factory and load us with ten-pound bags of California raisins; in the extraordinary resilience of the Tibetan monks who led us through the two-thousand-year-old palace of Yambulakang; in the Tibetan people who prostrated themselves, weeping, in the Potala Palace where the Dalai Lama once slept; and in the old Chinese men of Xian gathering in the park at dawn with elaborate bird cages balanced on their knees, smiling at us proudly as we stopped to listen to the noisy birds, delighted to be disturbing the stillness of a chill morning.

Leaving my church and my faith was not therefore only or even primarily an intellectual process, but a deeply phenomenological and emotional one (although these are difficult to separate). This exceptional and foreign world could not be accommodated by the narrow framework of my childhood beliefs, and neither could its moral dilemmas. It was an experience of something I would later encounter in theory: an understanding of the world as given, as lived moment by moment, and spectacularly (rather than dangerously) susceptible to change. Five years after my final backpacking adventure I would read Maurice Merleau-Ponty's beautiful phrases: "I am thinking of the Cartesian cogito, wanting to finish this work, feeling the coolness of the paper under my hand, and perceiving the trees of the boulevard through the window. My life is constantly thrown headlong into transcendent things, and passes wholly outside me."<sup>5</sup> These words opened the floodgates to a kind of thinking and writing in which intellect and affect, transcendence and immanence, mind and body, philosophy and poetry, were inextricably entangled.

It took some time, however, to understand and negotiate the void that leaving God opened up in my life. I struggled periodically with a profound sense of meaninglessness in my twenties, something I would later understand—reading Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre—as simply the human condition. I had, for about five years, relished being a servant of God, constantly begging him to tell me his will for my life, acting out of sincerity and compassion, I believe, but nevertheless with one ultimate goal in mind: to please God. It was an experience probably incomprehensible to one who has never believed in a God, or has only nurtured a faith tangential to the rest of one's life, but many will understand why the language I use here evokes the intensity and intimacy of the relationship between lovers. When I encountered the texts of medieval mystics such as Mechtild of Magdeburg and Hildegard of Bingen during my graduate studies, the ardent sentiments these women expressed were not unfamiliar. "Ah, Lord, love me passionately, love me often, and love me long," Mechtild writes, "For the

more passionately you love me, the purer I shall become. The more often you love me, the more beautiful I shall become. The longer you love me, the holier I shall become here on earth.”<sup>6</sup> Anyone who has lost God must accomplish the work of mourning Freud describes as the painful coming to grips with the loss of a beloved object; an object to which our libido is firmly attached, and which we are reluctant to abandon even if we accept that it no longer exists.<sup>7</sup>

I tried to fill this void in a number of ways. Despite my earlier promise never to darken the door of a university again, I discovered a field that spoke to my need to think starting from the basis of experience, and returned to school to complete a B.A. in Women’s Studies. Finding myself in the unexpected situation of being divorced and the sole caregiver of a young child, and quite suddenly realizing my need for intellectual engagement, I was drawn to those women writers who introduced me to the social construction of mothering, who made the familiar *unfamiliar*, wreaking havoc with my assumptions and awakening me to a political world of which I knew nothing. I met Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Ramsay, who braces herself to meet Mr. Ramsay’s demand for sympathy, his desire to be assured of his genius, and pours her energy into this task, “as a nurse carrying a light across a dark room assures a fractious child” until “there was scarcely a shell of herself left for her to know herself by; all was so lavished and spent.”<sup>8</sup> I read Simone de Beauvoir asking the radical question, what is a woman?—“Are there women, really?”—and understood implicitly her description of the “independent woman” who feels tied to her body, and longs to lose herself in the intellectual life reserved for men.<sup>9</sup> I encountered psychoanalysis and became fascinated by the development of the sexed subject and the relation between self and other, which later brought me to the work of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Emmanuel Lévinas.

My discovery of feminism *as a cause*, however, to replace the purpose religion had given me, only provided a short-lived excitement. I encountered in our women-only events, in our celebration of some unnamable feminine essence and a concomitant exclusivity and moralism, and in our unwillingness to engage in self-critique (though this was not acknowledged), echoes of my Christian past. This was my introduction to the workings of ideology, and to the beginnings of a critique of identity politics that preoccupies me still. The dogma and moralism I had tried to flee seemed to cling to me. I heard it in my own voice as an enthusiastic feminist, unable (for a time) to recognize the self-righteousness of the platform from which some of us spoke.

It was not long before my attraction to the work of de Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty, with their emphasis on the contingency of ethics and politics, and to the feminist and postcolonial criticism that nurtured my growing interest in political struggle, led me to the fields we call poststructuralism and critical theory. In the work of Foucault and Derrida, Hélène Cixous, Gilles Deleuze, Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak, among others, I found my first philosophical home.

### Paradox

It was a flight from the necessity of foundational thinking and moral absolutes that drew me to those European thinkers of the twentieth century who were affected by the events of fascism and the Shoah, and whose work never forgets this history. It made sense to me that the lessons of such a history would point to the impossibility of normative ethical and political precepts. Wouldn't an encounter with fascism, totalitarianism, and genocide, however directly or indirectly experienced, result in an understanding of ethics as contingent, as fundamentally constituted by ambiguity—a notion de Beauvoir elaborated in her own response to the events of this history? A paradox is introduced to the destiny of humankind, she writes in the opening to *The Ethics of Ambiguity*; man escapes from his natural condition without freeing himself from it: "He asserts himself as a pure internality against which no external power can take hold, and he also experiences himself as a thing crushed by the dark weight of other things."<sup>10</sup> While men have always felt this tragic ambiguity, it is the philosophers who "have tried to mask it" by denying death and establishing a hierarchy between body and soul. They have proposed an ethics that also eliminates this ambiguity, "by making oneself pure inwardness or pure externality, by escaping from the sensible world or by being engulfed in it, by yielding to eternity or enclosing oneself in the moment."<sup>11</sup>

These passages are profound statements about the necessity of thinking ethics phenomenologically. Let us look the truth in the face, de Beauvoir urges her reader, "let us try to assume our fundamental ambiguity. It is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our life that we must draw our strength to live and our reason for acting."<sup>12</sup> Why do we act for the good of others if we do not do so to please a God? Conversely, how can we consider a deed done in the name of pleasing a God a good act? Why would following a moral precept be considered an ethical act at all? In the search for

moral templates, it seems, as Martha Nussbaum puts it in her characterization of the dominant tradition in ethical philosophy since Plato, that we struggle to eliminate all that which is “messy, needy, uncontrolled, rooted in the dirt and standing helplessly in the rain.”<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, such a project permits us to forget the thoroughly political nature of ethics. What can “moral autonomy” mean when we never act alone, never make decisions alone, and when our actions never affect only ourselves?

Deleuze appears to echo de Beauvoir’s sentiment that it is the immanent conditions of life that give us our reason for acting when he writes that ethics means “not to be unworthy of what happens to us.”<sup>14</sup> It is an enigmatic claim that unmoors our association of ethics with identity and norms, evoking instead the absolute surprise of the event, which can never be anticipated, which comes to us from the future—an unknown interruption of time. Politics is “active experimentation” then, since we never know what will come, Deleuze suggests.<sup>15</sup> If ethics no longer appeals to a God, if it is considered immanent, no longer based on judgment but on the creation of new ways of existing, he adds, then ethics becomes inextricably related to politics. We could say then, that *both* politics and ethics become “active experimentation.” Not to be unworthy of the unpredictable, uncontrollable events that come to us out of nowhere and hold us in their powerful grip alludes to our responsibility and agency as subjects of history, and to our rejection of *ressentiment*: “To grasp whatever happens as unjust and unwarranted (it is always someone else’s fault) is, on the contrary, what renders our sores repugnant—veritable *ressentiment*, resentment of the event. There is no other ill will. What is really immoral is the use of moral notions like just or unjust, merit or fault. What does it mean then to will the event? Is it to accept war, wounds, and death when they occur? It is highly probable that resignation is only one more figure of *ressentiment*, since *ressentiment* has many figures.”<sup>1</sup>

Not resignation then, in the face of crises, but a turning of the event into an affirmation. What will we do with our inheritances? How will the past enable a future? I will return to these questions later.

These ideas have much in common with the later writings of Derrida, who doggedly insists on the aporetic nature of politics and ethics. We must “calculate”—make decisions, judgments, laws—yet these must always remain open to the “incalculable,” those “messy” contingencies impossible to contain or prescribe away, without which we could never act ethically or justly, only technocratically through the deployment of rules. A decision which is not made in the midst of this obligation to calculate when calculation

is impossible, Derrida argues, one made neither freely nor responsibly but according to a program, is not just.<sup>17</sup> Hence there is a fundamental moment of undecidability required in an ethical decision, one that is a prerequisite for any action and any judgment at all.

At the phenomenological, immanent level of lived experience, I think we know this well. Both Deleuze and Derrida are criticized for ideas that necessarily lead to relativism or nihilism, but we need to ask why it is that when we are forced to rely solely on our responses to the events that enfold us—often without the luxury of time for deliberation—that we fear there is no ethical component to our actions. This seems to be precisely when we are *most* ethical; when we respond to the human need that confronts us where we are standing, or when we deliberate between two impossible choices, agonizing over a paradox no rule could ever resolve, and attempt to do the right thing—or *not*—a possibility that will always exist.

Looking back over my Mennonite childhood and youth through the lens of these ideas, I see the scrupulous fuss over everyday behavior—especially that of one’s neighbor—as deflecting from the events one cannot control or prevent. There is no way to account for the atrocities many members of our community once experienced, and no way to prevent future violence from occurring, hence the interest in moral minutiae, the substance of which supplied many occasions for idle gossip at best, condemnation and excommunication at worst.<sup>18</sup> There is some comfort in the narrative that such atrocities were allowed by God as punishment for the sins of excess; for becoming prosperous and indifferent. Self-blame is easier to deal with than the utter randomness of violence, since it permits a modicum of control; violation and repression can be prevented from happening again simply by guarding against prosperity and a faith that has lost its fervor. Is there another way? How can we accept what we inherit—the events and our collective memory of them—and turn these unanticipated, often unwelcome, legacies into an affirmation of the future?

Deleuze’s insistence that ethics must deal with the event is a rejection of the question: how could I have become a victim of this or that tragedy? How do we not dwell in our “repugnant sores”? Several years ago I accompanied my mother on a “Mennonite Heritage Tour” to visit the place of her birth and the remnants of Mennonite villages in what were once the thriving Molotschna and Chortitza colonies of Ukraine, established by the Prussian Mennonite immigrants in 1789 and 1804 respectively. My interest in family history overrode the discomfort I knew I would experience being among a large group of Mennonites for the first time in many years, but I did not

anticipate the force of my reaction to Mennonite ethnocentrism. One of the tour guides, an eminent scholar of Russian Mennonite history who gave frequent lectures on the tour, seemed intent on promoting a Mennonite association with victimhood. Frequent comparisons were made with the Jewish experience. There were low rumblings of resentment at the world for failing to acknowledge the history of suffering of the Mennonite people—a people in perpetual exile, we were told. While visiting the memorial for the massacre of some 34,000 Jews on September 28 and 29, 1941, at Babi Yar, I overheard an elderly member of the tour group complaining to her companion about visiting a Jewish memorial when we were here to commemorate Mennonites. Jewish suffering received more than its share of world attention; what about Mennonite suffering? When I turned to her and asked why we could not commemorate tragic histories other than our own, she simply retorted that I was too young to understand as I had not been there to experience what they had.

As I had once been surprised to discover that the world from which we had been taught to separate ourselves was full of goodness and beauty, I was shocked when I discovered as an adult that many Russian Mennonite farmers were the prosperous “kulaks” I had read about in Marx and Engels and in Russian history texts, and that some of them had exploited the Ukrainian peasants who labored for them. No one ever spoke of this racism, and although I knew of the wealth of some of my ancestors from the photographs of their estates and family stories, this economic privilege was rarely mentioned except to remark on the fact that it was taken from them brutally. Although we heard repeatedly from the pulpit that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God, this seemed not to translate into daily practice.<sup>19</sup>

Equally surprising was my grandmother’s sudden show of emotion—rare indeed for this strong and stoic woman—one day as she talked to me of her past, describing how she had to beg for food with her starving young brothers. It was the Russian peasants who gave them bread, however, not her Mennonite neighbors. “They kicked us out!” she said repeatedly, her voice breaking; this indomitable woman under whose stalwart shadow we grew up.

None of these details detract from the inestimable gifts of a secure and happy childhood among people who loved me. Neither do they suggest that the work for which Mennonites are known and respected throughout the world is somehow less worthy, less deserving of respect. What they reveal for me is the necessity of rethinking this past and this inheritance of mine in order to understand the nature of community and the ethical relations

that constitute them. I would like to ask how we should demand accountability from those who have been traumatized. History has shown us that the experience of victimization does not often lead to an increased tolerance toward others, but to the folding of a community back into itself, and to the fortification of its borders. Sometimes, and perhaps more than sometimes in the infancy of this century, this leads to ongoing expressions of grievance and retaliatory violence. How indeed, can we become worthy of the events that happen to us?

### Today

It took me roughly twenty years after leaving the church and my hometown before I could return without experiencing an identity crisis. While there was never any pressure from my immediate family to return to the church, for they had (in less dramatic ways) also drifted from our religious community, there remained a veiled, residual sense of judgment that seemed to hang in the air for many years, probably in part the product of my own internalized criticism. This posed the most significant challenge for me, one that I confronted whenever I found myself in the company of Mennonites. It required a certain silencing; an encounter with who I once was and a dissociation from who I was in the present. It was not only a matter of remaining silent about my thoughts and ideas, but of betraying a profound insecurity about my voice—my agency—when I did attempt to speak up in the face of a daunting moral authority that no longer had any content for me, but nevertheless lingered and haunted.

The paradox of my inheritance has become clear: the very experiences that might lead a community to moralism and exclusivity, perhaps even hypocrisy and racism, are those that enable a reevaluation of our notions of community and ethics. In other words, individuals and communities who have experienced hardship and violence have a choice: they can attempt to secure themselves from the random and unexpected events of the future by fortifying their borders, hardening an identity against another, and nurturing a melancholic attachment to past victimhood that is in danger of sabotaging any kind of political survival; or they can engage in what is no doubt a painful, seemingly impossible struggle to accept a fundamental vulnerability to violence and injury and risk the trust and openness necessary for ethical and political practices that do not in turn victimize others. I have witnessed both of these responses in the Russian Mennonite community,

and in numerous other groups recovering from acts of discrimination and violence. It is the task in particular of my generation—in my time and place—and of all those whose parents once told them stories of inexplicable horror, to turn this legacy into an affirmation of an unpredictable future; to waive our right to the victim's revenge in its various guises from intolerance to extreme violence, and work tirelessly for the *prevention* of hatred, discrimination, and intolerance, not merely toward the application of emergency measures once they take hold.<sup>20</sup>

### NOTES

1. I speak specifically of the population referred to as “Russian Mennonites,” who originated in Prussia and populated Ukraine from the end of the eighteenth century to the 1930s, by which time most had emigrated or were sent to Russia, and whose ethnic identity and national allegiances remained German. I would add that my experience is very specific to a time and place—a relatively rural Mennonite community (of the branch called “United Mennonite” or “General Conference”)—and I make no claims to speak for the experiences of others in my own community or elsewhere.

2. One of the best-known organizations is the Mennonite Central Committee, a development agency that works in areas such as education, health, agriculture, peace and justice issues, relief work, and job creation around the world, and in North America with issues concerning immigration, refugee assistance, offenders and victims of crime, and so on. Other organizations include the Mennonite Disaster Service, the Mennonite Coalition of Refugee Support, the Mennonite New Life Centre, and the Mennonite Economic Development Associates.

3. I would like to stress here that this is not the case for everyone. There are, of course, Christian philosophers and Mennonite intellectuals who have not rejected their faith.

4. It is worth noting that the reference to “my church” here refers to the Mennonite Brethren church I began to attend in the latter years of high school, a group more evangelical and strict in their approach to moral behavior than the United Mennonite church of my childhood. These groups originally split in Ukraine over a disagreement about how baptism is performed (and in fact, during my youth the Mennonite Brethren expected any United Mennonite who wished to join their church to get rebaptized). That my formative teenage years were spent being active in the youth group of a Mennonite Brethren church meant that I experienced my faith quite differently from that of my siblings and the children with whom I grew up.

5. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), 369.

6. Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, trans. Frank Tobin (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1998), 52.

7. Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” in *On Murder, Mourning, and Melancholia*, trans. Shaun Whiteside (New York: Penguin Books), 204–5.

8. Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (London: Grafton Books, 1977), 38–39.

9. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952), 1. See also chapter 25, “The Independent Woman,” 679–715.

10. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Carol Communications, 1948), 7.

11. *Ibid.*, 8.

12. *Ibid.*, 9.

13. Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 2.

14. Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale, ed. Constantin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 149.

15. Gilles Deleuze, "Many Politics," in Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues II*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 137.
16. Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 149.
17. Jacques Derrida, "Ethics and Politics Today," *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971–2001*, ed. and trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 298.
18. While I did not belong to the kind of Mennonite sect that practices excommunication in the literal sense of banning, there are more subtle forms of this practice. One need not be physically exiled from family and church to feel excommunicated psychologically or emotionally.
19. Matthew 19:24.
20. I am inspired by two authors here: Frantz Fanon and Giorgio Agamben. Frantz Fanon writes in *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 228–29, that he will not accept the "amputation" of his victimization, explaining that he does not have the right to hope that the white man will feel guilt, the right to destroy white pride, to claim reparations, or to "cry out [his] hatred at the white man." The only right he does claim is "that of demanding human behavior from the other." Giorgio Agamben writes, in the context of a very different discussion on the task of democracy, "Maybe the time has come to work towards the prevention of disorder and catastrophe, and not merely towards their control. Today, there are plans for all kinds of emergencies (ecological, medical, military), but there is no politics to prevent them. . . . It is the task of democratic politics to prevent the development of conditions which lead to hatred, terror, and destruction—and not to reduce itself to attempts to control them once they occur." Agamben, "Security and Terror," trans. Carolin Emcke, *Theory and Event* 5.4 (2002): 2. I feel this is the task we face in local communities that have experienced some form of violation, and one which considerably alters our understanding of politics.