

NOW A LIFETIME MOVIE

INCLUDES
A GUIDE FOR
DISCUSSION

Amish *Grace*

How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy



DONALD B. KRAYBILL

STEVEN M. NOLT

DAVID L. WEAVER-ZERCHER

Table of Contents

[Praise](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[PREFACE](#)

[Part One](#)

[CHAPTER ONE - The Nickel Mines Amish](#)

[CHAPTER TWO - The Shooting](#)

[CHAPTER THREE - The Aftermath](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR - The Surprise](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE - The Reactions](#)

[Lauding Amish Forgiveness](#)

[Questioning Amish Forgiveness](#)

[Using Amish Forgiveness](#)

[Part Two](#)

[CHAPTER SIX - The Habit of Forgiveness](#)

[Anabaptist Habits](#)

[Forgiveness as First Response](#)

[Forgiveness in the Media Spotlight](#)

[Consequences, but Not Revenge](#)

[Forgiveness, Fear, and Sympathy](#)

[Playing the Repertoire in Georgetown](#)

CHAPTER SEVEN - The Roots of Forgiveness

The Amish and Discipleship

Reading Matthew and Practicing Forgiveness

The Lord 's Prayer

Forgiving to Be Forgiven

CHAPTER EIGHT - The Spirituality of Forgiveness

Amish Spirituality

Stories and Songs

Reflecting Forgiveness in a Martyrs Mirror

The Dramatic Witness of Dirk Willems

Forgiveness in Amish Schoolbooks

CHAPTER NINE - The Practice of Forgiveness

Train Up a Child

Giving Up Self

Preparing for Communion

The Struggle to Forgive

Fasting and Communion

Part Three

CHAPTER TEN - Forgiveness at Nickel Mines

What Is Forgiveness?

Amish Anger?

Instant Forgiveness?

" Forgiving " the Killer's Family

The Question of Self-Respect

CHAPTER ELEVEN - What About Shunning?

Members Meetings and Pardon
Excommunication
Shunning
Shunning and Forgiveness
Two Sides of Love

CHAPTER TWELVE - Grief, Providence, and Justice

Amish Grief
God's Providence and the Reality of Evil
Amish Views of Providence
Salvation and Final Judgment
Earthly Justice
This World Is Not Our Home

CHAPTER THIRTEEN - Amish Grace and the Rest of Us

The Amish Are Not Us
The Perils of Strip Mining
Extracting Lessons from Nickel Mines

AFTERWORD (2010)

INTERVIEW WITH TERRI ROBERTS

APPENDIX: THE AMISH OF NORTH AMERICA

ENDNOTES

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER READING

Acknowledgements

THE AUTHORS

INDEX

DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION GUIDE

Praise for *Amish Grace*

“Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy is one of those rare books that inspires deep personal reflection while recounting a moment in history, telling a sociological story, and exploring theological issues. In the fall of 2006, following the murders of Amish school children by a deranged gunman, how did the Amish manage to forgive the murderer and extend grace to his family so quickly and authentically? Making it clear that the answer involves no quick fix but an integrated, disciplined pattern of life—a pattern altogether upstream to the flow of American culture—the authors invite us to ask not just how to forgive but how we should live. In our era of mass violence and the derangement from which it comes, no question could be more timely.”

—*Parker J. Palmer, author of A Hidden Wholeness, Let Your Life Speak, and The Courage to Teach*

“Amish Grace tells a story of forgiveness informed by deep faith, rooted in a rich history, and practiced in real life. In an American society that often resorts to revenge, it is a powerful example of the better way taught by Jesus.”

—*Jim Wallis, author of God’s Politics; president, Sojourners/Call to Renewal*

“An inside look at a series of events that showed the world what Christ-like forgiveness is all about . . . A story of the love of God lived out in the face of tragedy.”

—*Tony Campolo, Eastern University*

“Amish Grace dissects the deep-rooted pattern of Amish forgiveness and grace that, after the Nickel Mines tragedy, caused the world to gasp.”

—*Philip Yancey, author of What’s So Amazing About Grace?*

“Covers the subject in a superb way. It gave me a private tutorial in Amish culture and religion . . . on their unique view of life, death, and forgiveness.”

—*Fred Luskin, author of *Forgive for Good*; director,
Stanford Forgiveness Projects*

“A remarkable book about the good but imperfect Amish, who individually and collectively consistently try to live Jesus’ example of love—for one another and for the enemy.” —Dr. Carol Rittner, R.S.M., Distinguished Professor of Holocaust & Genocide Studies, The Richard

Stockton College of New Jersey

“A casebook on forgiveness valuable for ALL Christians. . . . drills beneath the theory to their practice and even deeper to the instructions of Jesus.”

—*Dr. Julia Upton, R.S.M., Provost, St. John’s University*

“This is a very uplifting and enlightening book. It opens the door and allows us to peek at the hearts of Christian Amish believers who forgave horrid murders from the heart. And that forgiveness became a light on a hill that points to Jesus.”

—*Everett L. Worthington Jr., professor of psychology,
Virginia Commonwealth University*

Amish Grace

How Forgiveness
Transcended Tragedy



Donald B. Kraybill
Steven M. Nolt
David L. Weaver-Zercher

J JOSSEY-BASS
A Wiley Imprint
www.josseybass.com

Copyright © 2007 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. All rights reserved.

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

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise, except as permitted under Section 107 or 108 of the 1976 United States Copyright Act, without either the prior written permission of the publisher, or authorization through payment of the appropriate per-copy fee to the Copyright Clearance Center, Inc., 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923, 978-750-8400, fax 978-646-8600, or on the Web at www.copyright.com. Requests to the publisher for permission should be addressed to the Permissions Department, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, 201-748-6011, fax 201-748-6008, or online at www.wiley.com/go/permissions.

Readers should be aware that Internet Web sites offered as citations and/or sources for further information may have changed or disappeared between the time this was written and when it is read.

Limit of Liability/Disclaimer of Warranty: While the publisher and author have used their best efforts in preparing this book, they make no representations or warranties with respect to the accuracy or completeness of the contents of this book and specifically disclaim any implied warranties of merchantability or fitness for a particular purpose. No warranty may be created or extended by sales representatives or written sales materials. The advice and strategies contained herein may not be suitable for your situation. You should consult with a professional where appropriate. Neither the publisher nor author shall be liable for any loss of profit or any other commercial damages, including but not limited to special, incidental, consequential, or other damages.

Jossey-Bass books and products are available through most bookstores. To contact Jossey-Bass directly call our Customer Care Department within the U.S. at 800-956-7739, outside the U.S. at 317-572-3986, or fax 317-572-4002.

Jossey-Bass also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats. Some content that appears in print may not be available in electronic books.

All Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, King James Version.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kraybill, Donald B.

Amish grace : how forgiveness transcended tragedy / Donald B. Kraybill,
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

eISBN : 978-0-470-87381-6

1. Forgiveness of sin. 2. Amish-Doctrines. 3. West Nickel Mines Amish
School. I. Nolt, Steven M., II. Weaver-Zercher, David, III. Title.

BT795.K73 2007

364.152'30974815-dc22

2007019071

HB Printing

PB Printing

All author royalties from Amish Grace will be donated to the Mennonite Central Committee to benefit their ministries to children suffering because of poverty, war, and natural disaster.

For more information on the worldwide relief and service ministries of MCC, visit www.mcc.org.



PREFACE

Amish. School. Shooting. Never did we imagine that these three words would appear together. But the unimaginable turned real on October 2, 2006, when Charles Carl Roberts IV carried his guns and his rage into an Amish schoolhouse near Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. Five schoolgirls died that day, and five others were seriously wounded. Turning a tranquil schoolhouse into a house of horror, Roberts shattered a reassuring American myth—that the Old Order Amish remain isolated from the problems of the larger world.

The Amish rely less on that myth than do those who watch them from afar. In fact, their history reminds them that even the most determined efforts to remain separate from the world and its iniquities are not foolproof. The Nickel Mines Amish certainly didn't anticipate the horror of October 2. They were, however, uncommonly prepared to respond to it with graciousness, forbearance, and love. Indeed, the biggest surprise at Nickel Mines was not the intrusion of evil but the Amish response. The biggest surprise was Amish grace.

This book explains the Amish reaction to the Nickel Mines shooting, especially their forgiveness of the killer and their expressions of grace to his family. Given our longtime study of Amish life, we weren't entirely surprised by the Amish response. At the same time, their actions raised a host of questions in our minds: What exactly did the Amish do in the aftermath of the tragedy? What did it mean to them to extend forgiveness? And what was the cultural soil that nourished this sort of response in a world where vengeance, not forgiveness, is so often the order of the day?

As we explore these questions, we introduce some aspects of Amish culture to show the connection between Amish life and Amish grace. This tie is important for two reasons. First, it clarifies that their extension of grace was neither calculated nor random. Rather, it emerged from who they were long before that awful October day. Second, embedding the Amish reaction in the context of their history and practice enables us to suggest more easily what lessons may apply to those of us outside Amish circles.

In the Appendix we provide details about some of the distinctive features of this community, but a few words of introduction here will help set the stage for our story. The Amish descend from the *Anabaptists*, a radical Christian movement that arose in Europe in 1525, shortly after Martin Luther launched the Protestant Reformation. Opponents of the young radicals called them *Anabaptists*, a derogatory nickname meaning “rebaptizers,” because they baptized one another as adults even though they had been baptized as infants in the state church. These radical reformers sought to create Christian communities marked by love for each other and love for their enemies, an ethic they based on the life and teaching of Jesus. Nearly two centuries later, in the 1690s, the *Amish* emerged as a distinct Anabaptist group in Switzerland and in the Alsatian region of present-day France.

The Amish of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, are one of many Amish subgroups in North America. Most Amish groups are also known as *Old Orders* because they place a premium on maintaining old religious and social customs. *Mennonites*, who are religious cousins to the Amish, also trace their roots to the sixteenth-century Anabaptists. Many, but not all, of the Mennonite groups in the twenty-first century are more assimilated into mainstream culture and use more technology than the Amish.

Even though the occasion for this book is one we would like to erase from Lancaster County history, we believe it opens a window onto Amish faith. Buggies, beards, and bonnets are the distinctive markers of Amish life for most Americans. Although such images provide insights into Amish culture and the values they hold dear, Amish people are likely to say that they are simply trying to be obedient to Jesus Christ, who commanded his followers to do many peculiar things, such as love, bless, and forgive their enemies. This is not a picture of Amish life that can easily be reproduced on a postcard from Amish Country; in fact, it can be painted only in the grit and grime of daily life. Although it would be small comfort to the families who lost daughters that day, the picture of Amish life is much clearer now than it was before October 2006.



This book is about Amish grace, but it is also about forgiveness, pardon, and reconciliation. *Grace*, as we use it in this book, is a broad concept that characterizes loving and compassionate responses to others. A gracious response may take many forms: comforting a person who is grieving, providing assistance to someone in need, sacrificing for another's benefit, and so on. Amish people are somewhat uncomfortable talking about "Amish grace," because to them, grace is a gift that God alone can give. We use *grace* in a broader way throughout the book, as a synonym for graciousness and gracious behavior toward others.

Forgiveness is a particular form of grace that always involves an offense, an offender, and a victim (in this case, a victimized community). When forgiveness happens, a

victim forgoes the right to revenge and commits to overcoming bitter feelings toward the wrongdoer. Some people who have studied forgiveness extend this definition a step further, contending that positive feelings toward the offender—feelings such as love and compassion—are also essential to forgiveness. For their part, the Amish believe that gracious actions extended to the offender are an important aspect of authentic forgiveness. It is not our goal in this book to define forgiveness once and for all. Ours is a more modest goal: to tell the story of Amish forgiveness at Nickel Mines. Although we give priority to the Amish understanding of forgiveness, we sometimes link it to scholarly conversations on the topic.

In telling the Amish story, it is important to distinguish forgiveness from both pardon and reconciliation. Whereas in forgiveness the victim forgoes the right to vengeance, *pardon* releases an offender from punishment altogether. In many cases, pardon can be granted not by the victim but only by a person or institution with disciplinary authority over the offender (such as the judicial system). *Reconciliation* is the restoration of a relationship, or the creation of a new one, between the victim and the offender. Reconciliation is not necessary for forgiveness to take place, and of course it does not always happen, because it requires the establishment of trust between two willing parties. In many situations, however, reconciliation between victim and offender constitutes the ultimate goal, and forgiveness is a crucial step in that process.



We talked with more than three dozen Amish people in the course of writing this book, and we quote many of them

liberally in the following pages. Because Amish culture emphasizes humility, the Amish 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 grandmother” or “an Amish carpenter.” Similarly, we do not identify by name Amish people who wrote letters or essays in Amish magazines and correspondence newspapers.

For the eight individuals we quote extensively, we use typical Amish first names as pseudonyms (Amos, Eli, Gid, Katie, Mary, Mose, Sadie, and Sylvia). Each pseudonym refers to an actual person, not a composite of characters. This is a book about grace, and in that spirit we also use a pseudonym for the killer’s widow.

In a few circumstances, we use the real names of Amish people because their names were published so widely in the news media. We use the first names of the girls who attended the West Nickel Mines School, as well as their teacher’s first name. We also include the full names of Amish people in forgiveness stories unrelated to the schoolhouse shooting because these names have already appeared in the news media or in other publications when the stories were originally reported.

Finally, we must clarify our use of the phrase *the English*. Amish people often use this term for non-Amish people. The Amish speak a German dialect, Pennsylvania German (also known colloquially as Pennsylvania Dutch), as their first language. They also speak, read, and write English, which they typically learn when they begin school. Amish adults routinely speak English in their interactions with non-Amish neighbors, whom they refer to simply as “the English,” even if the outsiders have no formal ties to Great Britain. In the pages that follow, we use the terms *non-Amish*, *English*, and *outsiders* interchangeably.

We've organized the text into three parts. Part One, which comprises the first five chapters, tells the story of the school shooting and the responses that flowed in its wake. Part Two explores broader understandings and practices of forgiveness in Amish life. Part Three reflects on the meaning of forgiveness, not only for the Amish but for the rest of us as well.

Part One

CHAPTER ONE

The Nickel Mines Amish

We believe in letting our light shine, but not shining it in the eyes of other people.

—AMISH FATHER

The earliest streaks of light were barely breaking the eastern sky as we turned east in Strasburg, Pennsylvania.¹ Reading our MapQuest printout with a flashlight, we drove two miles and then turned south onto Wolf Rock Road. Ahead of us, two blinking red lights punctured the darkness, signaling the unhurried pace of a horse-drawn buggy. We slowed the car and followed the rhythmic *clip-clop, clip-clop* of the horse's hooves toward the top of a ridge.

We were searching for a place that one hopes never to be looking for. A shooting had occurred the day before at a one-room Amish school in a small community called Nickel Mines. As scholars of Amish life, we had spent that day responding to a flood of phone calls from reporters eager for information. Now we were headed to the scene of the tragedy, to answer more questions from the journalists gathered there.

We continued climbing “the ridge,” as the Amish call it, a low east-west range that slices the Lancaster Amish

settlement in half. The older section of the settlement, on the north side, was formed about 1760, when Amish moved near what would later become the village of Intercourse. In 1940, Amish pioneers pushed south of the ridge toward Georgetown in search of cheaper land. With the Old Order population doubling every twenty years, Georgetown soon became the hub of a thriving community. Today some eight hundred Amish families live within a four-mile radius of the small town. The “southern end,” as this section of the settlement is called, is hillier and also on the “slower, more conservative side,” according to the Amish who live in the older area to the north.

The flashing lights on the back of the buggy we were trailing reminded us that the Amish do not shun all technology. Although they spurn television, the Internet, car ownership, and other things they fear could harm their community, the Amish selectively use some innovations and adapt others in ways that help rather than hinder their way of life. Their struggle to tame technology—through the ingenuity of Amish “engineers”—has resulted in a fascinating blend of old and new: LED lights on buggies, steel wheels on modern tractors, cash registers run by batteries, shop saws powered by compressed air, and telephones kept in shanties outside of homes so they don’t disrupt family life. Some Amish businesses use the newly developed Classic Word Processor. Advertised as “nothing fancy, just a word horse for your business,” this electronic device has an eight-inch screen, a Windows operating system, and standard spreadsheet and word processing software. Unlike most computers, however, this “Old Order computer” has no connections for phone, Internet, or video games.

Even though we had spoken with reporters about the West Nickel Mines School for hours the day before, we were not sure of its location. We knew it was a dozen miles southeast

of Lancaster City, tucked away from Route 30, the busy tourist strip overflowing with restaurants and outlet stores. We also knew that the old nickel mines had folded in 1890 when the business fell prey to cheaper imported metals. Now the area was simply a rural region, mostly farms, small businesses, and bungalows scattered along curving country roads.

As we topped the ridge and approached Mine Road, a stop sign appeared in the gray dawn. Police cars blocked Mine Road to the right. An officer with a large flashlight came to our window and asked where we were headed. After seeing our identification, he waved us to the right and told us to park behind the TV trucks that lined Mine Road for as far as we could see.

Mine Road is a narrow, backcountry road with a few scattered houses on the left side and farmland overlooking a small valley on the right. The West Nickel Mines Amish School lay near the bottom of the valley. Dozens of media trucks were parked along the berm of the road, their satellite dishes pointing skyward. A white board fence enclosed the schoolyard, the school building, two outhouses, and a ball field. Horses grazed in the pasture adjacent to the school, the site of another ball field. The one-room, nineteenth-century-style school with its rooftop bell made a lovely backdrop for the morning news. A peaceful and idyllic view, it could have been the vestibule of Paradise. In fact, a small village by that name lies just five miles over the ridge to the north.

We parked and walked down the road through a throng of television crews and journalists. Some of the reporters, disheveled and yawning, had apparently spent the night in their trucks. Several New York journalists, probably wishing for a Starbucks, had just returned from a convenience store five miles away with cups of a generic brew. Ahead of us a

small crossroads overflowed with even more media trucks. Dozens of journalists carrying notepads, microphones, and cameras milled around the area. “Where is Nickel Mines?” we asked one reporter as we approached. “This is it!” was his simple reply.

This was it? Only a few houses and a crossroads? An auction building squats on one corner of the intersection. There are no stores, gas stations, or coffee shops. The closest store, bank, and firehouse are located in Georgetown, about a mile and a half to the south. Overnight the parking lot of the auction house had turned into a media bazaar with satellite dishes, bright lights, the hum of diesel generators, and inquisitive reporters everywhere. This humble crossroads, barely a hamlet, had captured the world’s attention for a long day that would stretch into a week.

We stood at a soda machine beside the auction building, trying to get our bearings. Only seventeen hours earlier Charles Carl Roberts IV had bought a soda at this very spot, just four hundred yards from the West Nickel Mines School. He had waited while the twenty-six children played softball during their morning recess. An Amish member of the school board had seen him here but thought nothing of it because Roberts often hung out around the auction house. “Charlie could have done the shooting at the Georgetown School closer to his home,” said an Amish man, “but he probably thought it was too close to some houses.”



The Lancaster Amish settlement has more than 180 local congregations called church districts, each led by a team of ordained men—a bishop, a deacon, and two or three

ministers. The men, selected from within their district, serve as religious leaders in addition to their regular employment. They serve for life, without compensation or formal theological training.

Streams and roads mark the borders of each district, which serves as the social and religious home for twenty-five to forty families. Each Amish family worships with the other families who live within the boundaries of their district. When a district's membership grows too large for families to accommodate worship services at their homes, the district is divided. Because the families live so close and engage in many activities together outside church services, they know each other very well.

The Nickel Mines crossroads divides three districts: West Nickel Mines, East Nickel Mines, and Northeast Georgetown. Children from all three districts attended the West Nickel Mines School. "It was fortunate that the children came from three different districts," said an Amish man in retrospect, "so the grief and funeral preparations didn't fall on the members of just one district."

This is dense Amish country, where Amish farms and businesses nestle alongside those of their English neighbors. Bart Township, the municipal home of the Nickel Mines area, boasts a population of three thousand Amish and English who live in some eight hundred houses within sixteen square miles. As in many other Amish communities in North America, the Amish here have many friends among their English neighbors, and a lot of neighborly activity occurs across the cultural fences. About 75 percent of the firefighters in the Bart Township Fire Company are Amish, and some hold leadership positions. They do not drive the trucks, but they help to fight fires and organize fund-raisers for the company.

The willingness of Amish men to *ride* in the fire trucks they refuse to *drive* mirrors the Amish relationship to motor vehicles in general. In the early twentieth century, Amish leaders forbade car ownership for fear the car would unravel their communities, making it easier for members to drive off to cities and blend in with the larger world. Horse-and-buggy transportation helps to tether members to their local church district and ties them closely to their neighbors. Amish people do hire English “taxi drivers” who use their own vehicles to transport their Amish patrons for business, special events, and long-distance travel. Moreover, some Amish business owners have English employees who provide a truck or car for daily business-related travel. On the day of the shooting, parents of the injured children rode to hospitals in police cruisers and the vehicles of non-Amish drivers. Because flying is off-limits, they declined offers to go by helicopter to the hospitals, although many of the injured were transported that way.

As the sun erased the overnight darkness, the school came into clearer focus. It was a typical one-room Amish school sporting a cast-iron bell in a small cupola on the roof. Built in 1976, the yellow stucco building sat in a former pasture about fifty yards from White Oak Road and about a quarter mile from the nearest Amish homes. There are more than fourteen hundred similar Amish-operated schools across the country. Most, but not all, Amish youth in North America attend private Amish schools like this one. After completing eighth grade, the “scholars,” as the Amish call their pupils, begin vocational apprenticeships at their homes, farms, or home-based shops, or with a nearby neighbor or relative.

The West Nickel Mines School is one of thirty Amish schools within a four-mile radius of Georgetown. These one-room schools, like the Amish church districts they serve, are named for nearby towns and locally known sites—Cedar Hill,

Wolf Rock, Georgetown, Valley Road, Bartville, Mt. Pleasant View, Peach Lane, Green Tree, and so on. More than 190 Amish schools are sprinkled across the Lancaster County Amish settlement, which spills eastward into Chester County. A school board composed of three to five men supervises one or two schools—hiring the teachers, caring for maintenance, and managing the finances.

Private Amish schools like this one in Nickel Mines are relatively new. In fact, Amish children attended rural public schools until the advent of large, consolidated schools in the mid-twentieth century. Consolidation meant that Amish pupils could no longer walk to school; it also meant that their parents had less control over the schools their children attended. Increasingly the teachers in the big schools came from faraway places and had little knowledge of Amish life. To their dismay, Amish parents found their high-school-age children exposed to topics and classes they disapproved of, such as evolution and physical education.

The Amish objected to this revolutionary change in public schools. In their view, a good eighth-grade education in the basics of reading, writing, spelling, and arithmetic was all that was needed for success in Amish life. In fact, in Lancaster County dozens of Amish parents were jailed in the early 1950s because they refused to send their children to consolidated schools beyond the eighth grade. Eventually the U.S. Supreme Court, in a 1972 case known as *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, allowed Amish children to end their formal education when they turned fourteen. Both the threat of consolidated schools and the court decision spurred the growth of Amish private schools.

Compared to homes, barns, and shops, schools contain the least amount of technology in Amish society. Typically this technology includes only a battery-run wall clock, a propane gas light, and a kerosene, coal, or wood stove.

There are no calculators, microscopes, computers, electrical outlets, security cameras, or televisions. One Amish teacher, often with the help of an aide, teaches all eight grades in the same classroom. The curriculum, taught in English, focuses on the basics: spelling, reading, penmanship, grammar, arithmetic, and some geography. A quiet but orderly hum hovers over the room as children whisper and help one another while the teacher works with one or two grades at a time. A student's raised hand, asking for permission to get a library book or use the outhouse, usually receives a subtle nod from the teacher. At the end of the day, the scholars turn into janitors—sweeping the floor, replacing books on the library shelves, and tidying up the bats and balls in the foyer.

Many people are surprised to learn that religion is not taught as a separate subject in Amish schools. Instead, it is imparted through Bible reading, prayer, hymns and songs, and the exemplary behavior of the teacher. The Amish believe that formal religious instruction belongs in the family and church, not in the school. Of course, values permeate the school “all day long in our curriculum and in the playgrounds,” according to one Amish school manual. This occurs, the manual explains, “by not cheating in arithmetic, by teaching cleanliness and thrift in health . . . by learning to make an honest living . . . and by teaching honesty, respect, sincerity, humbleness, and the golden rule on the playground.”



As we peered across the road at the West Nickel Mines School, journalists gathered around us in search of information. Their questions were sensible and to the point:

What do the Amish think about . . . ? How do the Amish react to . . . ? What do the Amish teach in their schools?

As straightforward as their questions were, the reporters often began with the wrong assumption: that all Amish people in North America are shaped by the same cultural cookie cutter. In fact, there are many different subgroups of Amish, each with their own unique practices. For example, some, such as the Lancaster Amish, drive gray-topped carriages, but others drive carriages with black, yellow, or white tops. Occupations, dress patterns, wedding and funeral practices, and accepted technology vary across the many Amish subgroups. In a few subgroups, business owners are permitted to own cell phones; most Amish homes have indoor toilets but some do not; certain groups permit the use of in-line roller skates but others do not; and so on. With sixteen hundred church districts across the country, with religious authority anchored in local districts, and without an Amish “pope,” there are many different ways of being Amish in North America.

We tried to respond to the reporters with specifics about the Amish in the Nickel Mines area, but even here there are different personalities and practices. The diversity found in other ethnic and religious groups is also rife among the Amish. How could we squeeze all of this cultural complexity into short sound bites for the evening news?

Part of the reason we were in such demand the day of the shooting was the Amish aversion to publicity. No lawyers or family spokespersons represented the grieving Amish parents or provided statements to the media. With a few exceptions, the Amish did not want to talk with the media or appear on camera. This reticence came not from the sudden shock of the shooting but from a deep aversion to publicity that is grounded in their religious beliefs and cultural traditions.

Taking their cues from the Bible, the Amish have long declined the media spotlight, preferring to live quietly and privately. They take seriously Jesus' words, "Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them . . . do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do . . . let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth. . . . And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray . . . in the corners of the streets, that they may be *seen of men*" (emphasis added). These verses from Chapter Six of Matthew's Gospel appear right before the Lord's Prayer, the model prayer that Jesus taught his disciples. The instruction is clear: do not practice your religion in public to show off your piety. Practice your faith privately, and your Father in heaven will reward you.

The Amish also refrain from publicity because, as a collective society, they believe that the community should come first, not the individual. Having one's name in a newspaper story manifests pride by calling attention to one's opinions; therefore, some Amish people will talk to the press but only if they can remain anonymous. Faith must at times be practiced in public but should not, in the Amish view, be showcased. "We believe in letting our light shine," said one Amish father, "but not shining it in the eyes of other people."

Posing for photographs is also discouraged. The Amish cite the second of the Ten Commandments, "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing" (Exodus 20:4), as a reason for not posing for photographs. To pose for a picture is considered an act of pride that places the individual on a pedestal. Such self-promotion not only calls excessive attention to the individual, but it also borders on self-worship.

So the reporters covering the West Nickel Mines School shooting faced a quandary. How could they cover a people

who didn't want to be covered, let alone at a time of deep grief and shock? The shooting was relatively easy to cover: police reports and public records were readily available within a day of the tragedy. Reporting about the Amish community was a different matter altogether.



As we retraced our steps on Mine Road to prepare for an interview, we yielded to an Amish farmer approaching with a bench wagon pulled by two mules. Sitting on an elevated seat at the front of the enclosed wagon, he looked like a stagecoach driver. As we waited for the mule-drawn wagon to pass a string of mobile TV studios beaming their news around the world, it felt for a moment as if we were in a time warp.

The large gray wagon held benches, songbooks, and eating utensils. Because the Amish have no church buildings, enclosed wagons transport supplies from home to home as families take turns hosting the biweekly church service. The three-hour Sunday morning service, called *Gmay* (a dialect shortcut for the word *church*), is followed by a fellowship meal and may be attended by as many as two hundred people. The church service is held in large first-floor rooms or the basement of a home, in the upper level of a barn, or in a shop.

The wagons also bring benches to the homes of grieving families after a death. Hundreds of friends and family members come to the home for viewing and visitation after a body returns from an English mortuary. The visitation period typically stretches over several days and evenings before the funeral. Sixteen hours after the school shooting, the bench wagons were converging on the homes of families

who would soon bury their children. The benches carried by the wagons would be used for seating in the barns where the funerals were slated for Thursday and Friday.

The bench wagon illustrated a point we repeated over and over again to reporters who asked, “Are the Amish prepared to deal with a tragedy like this?” Our answer was a paradox, perhaps a little unexpected. Of course, the Amish were not prepared, we said—except, of course, they were.

In one sense, no community is ever prepared for such a calamity. There have been few murders in Amish history, and never before had there been a school massacre. Certainly adults and children had died in tragic accidents, but there were no parallels to the Nickel Mines shooting. Amish schools, with no history of violence, are not designed with such incidents in mind. There are no metal detectors at the doors, no daily body searches for concealed weapons, no police officers patrolling the hallways, no policies for emergencies, and no drills to prepare for hostage situations. The children who attend a one-room Amish school come from ten or so nearby families. Doors are unlocked and sometimes stand open when school is in session. Amish schools offer children a deep sense of security: their peers are neighbors and their teachers are frequent visitors to their homes. Some of the younger children would likely not recognize a pistol if they saw one. Almost without exception, young Amish children have not seen violent movies, video games, or television; they can hardly imagine violence, apart from a fistfight. So were the Amish prepared for the outburst of violence that hit them that Monday in October? Of course not.

At the same time, the Amish are better prepared than most Americans to deal with a tragedy like this. The Amish are a close-knit community woven together by strong ties of family, faith, and culture. Members in distress can tap this

rich reservoir of communal care during horrific events. The typical Amish person has seventy-five or more first cousins, many living nearby. Members of a thirty-family church district typically live within a mile or so of each other's homes. When tragedy strikes—fire, flood, illness, or death—dozens of people surround the distressed family with care. They take over their chores, bring them food, set up benches for visitation, and offer quiet words of comfort. The Amish call this thick web of support *mutual aid*. They literally follow the New Testament commandment to “bear ye one another's burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). So while no one is ever ready to deal with a tragedy like this, historic practices had prepared the Amish well.

As the bench wagon came closer, we were surprised that the mules were not spooked by the TV crews and their noisy generators. What did frighten them, however, was a yellow plastic strip, two inches high and six inches wide, stretching across the road. The plastic cover protected electric cords running from an English residence to some of the media trucks. The mules stopped and refused to cross the yellow strip. After trying to persuade them from his seat on the wagon, the driver finally got off, walked in front of them, and tugged on their bridles. They still refused. After several more minutes of their owner's persuasion and gentle tugs, the animals gingerly stepped across the yellow line. Despite the sudden appearance of electric cords and satellite dishes, the viewings in the grieving community at Nickel Mines would proceed on schedule.

