



The
Amish
Way

Patient Faith in a Perilous World

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

Authors of the National Best-Seller
Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy



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Table of Contents

[Praise](#)

[OTHER BOOKS BY THE AUTHORS](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[PREFACE](#)

[One Braid, Three Strands](#)

[Patient Faith in a Perilous World](#)

[Looking Ahead](#)

[Part I - Searching for Amish Spirituality](#)

[CHAPTER ONE - A Peculiar Way](#)

[A Homespun Scholar](#)

[Unwilling Warriors](#)

[A Church-First Businesswoman](#)

[A Reluctant Minister](#)

[A Self-Taught Artist](#)

[A Would-Be Violinist](#)

[A Retro Remodeler](#)

[A Family That Accepts Death](#)

[A Compassionate Community](#)

[A Peculiar People](#)

[CHAPTER TWO - Spiritual Headwaters](#)

[Generic Christians?](#)

[Heretics and Infidels](#)

[Lingering Marks of Martyrdom](#)
[Amish Birth Pangs](#)
[Time-Tested Songs and Prayers](#)
[Rick Warren Enters the Mix](#)

[Part II - The Amish Way of Community](#)

[CHAPTER THREE - Losing Self](#)

[Sheilaism](#)
[Where Everybody Knows Your Name \(and More\)](#)
["You Go First"](#)
[Boxer Shorts or Briefs?](#)
[Born Again?](#)
[A One-Track Gospel](#)
[Reading the Bible the Amish Way](#)
[Letting Our Light Shine](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR - Joining Church](#)

[People, Not Steeples](#)
[To Be or Not to Be?](#)
[Baptized on Bended Knee](#)
[God's Search Committee](#)
[Playing by the Rules](#)
[Holding the Line](#)
[Any Place for Grace?](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE - Worshipping God](#)

[A Twenty-Minute Hymn](#)
[Folks Are a-Coming](#)
[Patient Worship](#)
[I Don't Know Where I'm Going](#)

Preparing for the Lord's Supper
The Holiest Days of the Year

CHAPTER SIX - Living Together

Mutual Care Instead of Insurance
A Thinking-of-You Shower
What About the Wayward?
Decisions Endorsed in Heaven
The Return of the Prodigal
Delivering People to Satan
A Dose of Tough Love
Coming Home

Part III - The Amish Way in Everyday Life

CHAPTER SEVEN - Children

A Sacred Calling
Singing Their Way Through Childhood
It's the Spanking
Fleeing the Devil's Workshop
Reading, 'Riting, 'Rithmetic, and Religion
Habit-Forming Practices

CHAPTER EIGHT - Family

Prayerful Rhythms
Seeking Still Waters
Sunday Routines
Singing: An Antidote for Depression
A Five-Minute Wedding
"Men and Women Aren't the Same"
Mingling Across the Generations

CHAPTER NINE - Possessions

Jesus, the Ordnung, and iPods
Enemy Territory
Are Cars Immoral?
Pulling the Plug
Escaping Fads and Fashions
Seeking Simplicity
The Lure of Walmart

CHAPTER TEN - Nature

A Window into Heaven
Out in the Fields with God
Creeks and Children
Wild Things and "Honey Spots"
Are We Good Shepherds?
"Green Amish"

CHAPTER ELEVEN - Evil

The Problem of Evil
Thy Will Be Done
The Sound of Silence
Forgiving to Be Forgiven
Kicking the Problem Upstairs
Working with Worldly Justice

CHAPTER TWELVE - Sorrow

Life's Special Sunbeams
A Legacy of Suffering
A One-Arm Embrace of Medicine
Anointing with Oil

Funerals Without Flowers
In Heaven's Waiting Room

Part IV - Amish Faith and the Rest of Us

CHAPTER THIRTEEN - The Things That Matter

Benefits of the Amish Way
Costs of Amish Life
Blessings Worth the Price?
Learning from the Amish

Acknowledgments

APPENDIX I: THE AMISH OF NORTH AMERICA

APPENDIX II: AMISH LECTIONARY

APPENDIX III: RULES OF A GODLY LIFE

NOTES

REFERENCES

THE AUTHORS

INDEX

Also by the Authors

Praise for *The Amish Way*

"*The Amish Way* gives voice to the passion and purpose that inspires the Amish lifestyle and provides a clear description of their religious practices and spiritual identities. A must read for anyone who wants to understand Amish motivations."

—James A. Cates, Ph.D., psychologist, founder of the Amish Youth Vision Project

"What is Amish spirituality? The authors describe a way of life that puzzles outsiders and invite readers to sample the Amish wisdom of simplicity, patience, and community. Even if you do not want to trade in your car for a buggy, *The Amish Way* offers insights to all spiritual seekers for a more meaningful life in a fragmented world"

—Diana Butler Bass, author, *A People's History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story*

"Everything you wanted to know about Amish spirituality but were too busy to ask. This is a sympathetic and clear account, with a thoroughness that exceeds books three times its size."

—Rodney Clapp, author, *Johnny Cash and the Great American Contradiction*

OTHER BOOKS BY THE AUTHORS

Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy Donald B. Kraybill, Steven M. Nolt, David L. Weaver-Zercher

DONALD B. KRAYBILL

The Amish and the State (edited)

Amish Enterprise: From Plows to Profits (with Steven M. Nolt)

Anabaptist World USA (with C. Nelson Hostetter)

Concise Encyclopedia of Amish, Brethren, Hutterites, and Mennonites

On the Backroad to Heaven: Old Order Hutterites, Mennonites, Amish, and Brethren (with Carl Desportes Bowman)

The Riddle of Amish Culture

STEVEN M. NOLT

Amish Enterprise: From Plows to Profits (with Donald B. Kraybill)

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Plain Diversity: Amish Cultures and Identities (with Thomas J. Meyers)

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The Amish and the Media (edited with Diane Zimmerman Umble)

The Amish in the American Imagination

Vital Christianity: Spirituality, Justice, and Christian Practice
(edited with William H. Willimon)

Writing the Amish: The Worlds of John A. Hostetler

The Amish Way

Patient Faith in a
Perilous World



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

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

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

The Amish Lectionary found in Appendix II is printed with permission of Pathway Publishers from
In Meiner Jugend: A Devotional Reader in German and English, first printing in 2000, reprint 2008. Translation by Joseph Stoll 1999.

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

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.

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 LEADER¹

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.[a](#)

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 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 doing household work for her aunt. She was baptized into the Amish church, with what she calls “a very serious commitment,” at the age of sixteen.

But her yearning for more education did not go away, and she soon did what very few Amish people do: she took eligibility exams and was admitted to college without a high school diploma. “I told my Amish bishop about my desire to go to college so that I could become a good teacher, and he reluctantly gave his approval.” Eventually, however, her professional pursuits became public, and the bishop rescinded his permission. Because her pursuits violated church standards, she was excommunicated just before her senior year of college.

“This was a very painful experience,” Nancy recalls, and describes meeting with her bishop a few days before her exit. “He was a deeply caring person,” she says. “I asked questions about education and sin. . . . I wanted to continue both my education and membership in the Amish community. He would not say that further education was sin, and he agonized to explain why excommunication was necessary if I did not repent. Both of us were sensitive and hurt deeply. We cried unashamedly.”

Nancy eventually received a master's degree and became a social worker. Unlike many ex-Amish people who feel deeply wounded, even embittered, by their community's decision to expel them, Nancy continues to have warm feelings toward the church of her youth. In fact, she credits some of her success as a social worker—her ability “to feel compassion and caring,” as well as her commitment to straightforward communication—to her Amish roots. “Like my Amish bishop, I've been able to set limits for others with a great deal of caring and love so that the limits are not interpreted as rejection.” [5](#)

A Retro Remodeler

Although articles and books about home improvement abound, Jesse, a forty-year-old father of six, needed remodeling knowledge of a different kind. Early in their married life, Jesse and his wife, Ruthie, bought a home on a three-acre plot of land. Jesse works in a furniture factory, so they didn't need much farmland, but he and Ruthie wanted a place with a barn and some pasture for their horses and enough acreage for a garden. This property fit the bill.

There was one problem, however: the previous owners were not Amish. This meant that Jesse and Ruthie had to “de-electrify” the house when they moved in to make it comply with church regulations. “The first thing we did was to begin using bottled-gas lights in our house,” Jesse said. “This change announced, ‘This is an Amish home.’” They also hooked up a propane-powered refrigerator and stove to gas lines connected to a propane tank outside.[b](#) Other changes followed until finally they faced their biggest issue: the electric water pump. “That was the hardest thing for me,” Jesse confessed.

The electricity to run the water pump cost only \$15 per month, but Jesse and Ruthie had to pay \$14,000 to install a small diesel engine to replace the electric pump. The diesel engine creates pneumatic (air) power to operate their water pump, washing machine, and Ruthie's sewing machine. Their propane refrigerator cost twice as much as an electric one, said Jesse. In fact, "it would have been cheaper for us to stay electric."

The de-electrification process took about four years. "Our ministers were very understanding," Jesse said. "The main thing was to be headed in the nonelectric direction," a direction that signaled to fellow church members that Jesse's family took the church's rules seriously. Today the shell of an electric meter remains visible on the outside of their brick farmhouse, but it hasn't carried any current for years.

A Family That Accepts Death

Elam was an eighteen-year-old carpenter. One Wednesday morning, he fell from a roof and suffered serious head injuries. An ambulance rushed him to a nearby hospital, where medical staff placed him on a respirator and conducted tests to decide treatment. Within two days, however, the attending doctor determined that Elam's brain was not functioning. His family, though grieving deeply, decided that they wanted to release him into God's loving hands and cease medical intervention.

Trained to view death as defeat, the hospital staff resisted removing the respirator. Finally, on the following Monday, the family prevailed on the hospital to disconnect the machine. Elam's breathing ceased, and doctors declared him dead.