



Part I

*Searching for Amish
Spirituality*

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL



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.*

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

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

A Self-Taught Artist

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

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

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

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

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

A Would-Be Violinist

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

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

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.* 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

*In lieu of electricity, the Amish use other types of energy to power household appliances. See Chapter Nine and Appendix I for more detail.

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.

"You will note that the obituary published in the Lancaster newspaper says that he died on Monday," an Amish church member noted later, but "the time of death . . . was announced at the funeral as having been on Friday." The Amish did not believe that a body forced to breathe by a machine was a living person, despite the insistence of medical professionals. "The truth was that his soul had fled," a family friend explained.⁶

A Compassionate Community

In February 2007, a twenty-eight-year-old Amish schoolteacher named Leah King was making her way along a narrow road to the one-room school where she taught Amish children. Leah lived less than a mile

from the school, and she walked to work almost every day. This particular morning was cold and icy, and Leah was struck by a pickup truck that hit a patch of ice and slid out of control. She died at the scene.⁷

Although grief-stricken by the death of their daughter, sister, and friend, many Amish people also understood the heartache of the driver, Earl Wenger, and his family. Shortly after the accident, the King family invited the Wenger family to attend Leah's viewing, which in Amish fashion took place in a home. When the Wengers arrived for the viewing, an Amish woman urged them to sit with the other mourners. "Most persons . . . who passed by us extended their hands to shake ours," recalls Wenger's daughter, who accompanied her parents. One Amish woman told Earl Wenger, "It's not your fault. It was God's will." When Wenger's wife asked her name, she answered, "I am Leah's mother."

A week later, an Amish newspaper carried a letter written by Leah's mother urging Amish people across the country to "keep him [Earl Wenger] in our thoughts and prayers." She also included Wenger's mailing address, in case "anyone would like to send a few lines his way."⁸

In response the Wengers received over eighty sympathy cards, many of them addressed to "Dear Unknown Friends" or "Dear Ones." Each note was different, but the sentiments were always the same, full of compassion and concern. One note came from a fifteen-year-old Amish girl who, in the course of two pages, told the Wengers about the weather, her family members, and the joy of making maple syrup. She added, "I can only imagine how you must feel. But please don't blame yourself. Accidents do happen sometimes."⁹

A Peculiar People

Few Amish people would find the preceding stories remarkable. Non-Amish readers, however, might understand why the Amish have sometimes

been labeled “a peculiar people.”¹⁰ These unusual stories—and we could add many more—suggest that peculiar is an apt description.

To call something peculiar implies departing from a benchmark, in this case the dominant values of modern life—which, we might add, the *Amish* find quite peculiar. In mainstream society, desires for wealth, choice, status, justice, and personal acclaim run very high, so high that they sometimes jeopardize people’s health, their families, and their friendships. Most people rarely question these values; in fact, even recognizing them can be difficult.

Amish people are surely not peculiar or countercultural in every way. With few exceptions they believe in free-market capitalism, political democracy, and conservative family values. They value meaningful work, enjoy leisure, prefer pleasure over pain, marry for love, treasure their children, and grieve the loss of loved ones. On many fronts, however, the Amish do resist mainstream culture and challenge dominant assumptions about the good life. Some symbols of their resistance—horses and buggies, for example—are easy to spot. But such visible signs of Amish life stand on deep assumptions about contentment and the meaning of life.

The Amish don’t talk much about resistance. They are much more likely to speak about “obedience to God” or “separation from the world,” phrases that remind them that God-fearing people often find themselves out of step with the larger society. They also use the term *uffgevva*, a Pennsylvania German word that literally means “to give up,” to describe their rejection of self-centeredness. In other words, Amish resistance springs from their willingness to give themselves up to God and to the church.

Although media images of the Amish may conjure notions of Buddhist-like nirvana in which selfish desires have been overcome, Amish people don’t talk about their lives that way. For them, the giving-up process—yielding themselves to God’s will and submitting to the

church's expectations—is a lifelong struggle. It begins in childhood, ends at death, and punctuates many moments in between. A day rarely passes when an Amish person doesn't feel the need to give himself or herself up to God and community.

Giving up is not easy, even for committed Amish people. “Hen nature and human nature have a great deal in common,” writes one Amish farmer-theologian; human beings, like chickens, would rather be free to do as they please. Nonetheless, he continues, “true contentment is found in submission and obedience and in seeking God's will.”¹¹

This writer's claim, deeply rooted in Amish spiritual resources, shapes a host of Amish practices. Many of those resources, reaching back some four hundred years, are found on the bookshelves of Amish homes, as we will see in the next chapter.

