

# Contents

Introduction . . . . .	ix
1 From a Jumbled Mess to Jumbled Joys . . . . . <i>Jeanie (Euken) Wadel</i>	1
2 What if It Would've Been Worse? . . . . . <i>Jeff Bigger</i>	15
3 A More Biblical Church Setting . . . . . <i>Marvin Ketcham</i>	23
4 No Longer Raisins . . . . . <i>Andy &amp; Jean Meyer</i>	35
5 I Laughed Out Loud . . . . . <i>Dennis Bennetch</i>	51
6 The Sparrow Hath Found an House . . . . . <i>Beth Clasby</i>	59
7 Lord, Ain't There a Better Way of Life? . . . . . <i>Billy Baltozer</i>	85
8 I Have Decided to Follow Jesus . . . . . <i>Sonia Burke</i>	99
9 I Don't Care What It Will Cost . . . . . <i>Ronald Putt</i>	107
10 Just Come Fellowship With Us . . . . . <i>Russ &amp; Wendy Boyd</i>	125

# From a Jumbled Mess to Jumbled Joys

as told to Melanie Breneman

*From the midst of a difficult home situation in York, Pennsylvania, young Jeanie prayed for God to lead her into a different kind of life. God answered that prayer through a number of miraculous steps, including her family's move to a street where a Mennonite mission was located.*

“**B**ye, Miss Shelly.” I paused at my teacher’s desk at the end of another week of school.

Miss Shelly looked up with a smile. “Bye, Jeanie,” she responded. “I hope you have a good weekend.”

“Thanks,” I returned as I made my way out the door.

Just as I was leaving, Miss Nell came hurrying through the doorway from the school kitchen. “Hey, Jeanie! Just a minute!” she called after me. “I was wondering if you’d like to go with me on an outing with my youth group this weekend—that is if you don’t already have other plans.”

“I’d love to go along!” was my eager response. I always enjoyed the special times outside of school spent with my teachers. They were much more than teachers; they were friends and role models to me. After conversing more about the details of the weekend, I headed across the street to the house that I had called home until recently when I had gone to live with my employers, Jake and Viva.

Opening the door, I was greeted by the sound of the television blaring in the living room. The air was heavy with cigarette smoke, and I could hear some of my family members disputing with each other in the kitchen. Quickly I ascended the steps to what used to be my third-story bedroom—the room I had shared with my two sisters. It happened to be unoccupied at the moment, for which I was very thankful. I needed time to think!

Sprawling across the bed, I tried to sort out my jumbled thoughts. *Why is my life at home so different from what I witness in the lives of my teachers at school?* I allowed my thoughts to drift backwards in time.

It seemed that my life had been a jumbled mess ever since I could remember. Dad, with his love for gambling and his addiction to the bottle . . . Mom, with her violent temper (probably many times due to the frustration she felt with her life) and her habitual smoking . . . my three older siblings, caught in the vices of strong drink, gambling, smoking, drugs, and impure relationships . . . my five younger siblings (born to my mother after my parents’ shaky marriage ended in divorce), all struggling to survive in the tumultuous surroundings in which they found themselves.

*And me?* I asked myself. *Why am I here? Where am I going? What DO I want for my life, anyway?* I had already tried many

of the things my older siblings were involved in, but they didn't satisfy the deep longings of my heart. There really *was* something in the lives of my teachers that attracted me. But was it for me? Could I ever attain the kind of life that they knew as normal?

All through my life I had known about God. My siblings and I often attended church services in various denominations. Some of them emphasized the need to make sure one was saved from the wrath of God. They applied a lot of pressure on us children to be born again. This had instilled a lot of fear in my young life. When I was seven years old, I yielded to these teachings and asked Jesus to come into my heart. I didn't really understand what I was doing, but my fear of the awful, impending judgment of God drove me to be sure I was ready for that day. Ever since, my life had been a series of failure, fear, and uncertainty, coupled with occasional recommitments, victory, and triumph. I truly wanted to serve God with my life, but had no idea how to do so.

With our family's move to Poplar Street, I had come into contact with a new and very different group of people. First of all, I met the Mennonite pastor, Clayton Shenk and his family, who lived just up the street. Over time, I spent many hours in their home. It was so peaceful . . . so different from what I was accustomed to. Their children were all younger than I, but we had lots of good times together. I enjoyed cooking and baking with Clayton's wife, Mary Lois. And then there were the youth activities—the times when young people came from somewhere outside the city and invited the children from the surrounding area to join them for games, a Bible lesson, and refreshments. I always looked forward to those times. They had a calming, invigorating

effect on my life, and with each encounter, my inner longing for something different grew stronger.

Two younger couples from the Tidings of Peace Mennonite Church, John and Melanie Breneman and Brian and Michelle Nolt, lived directly across the street from my family. I had enjoyed spending time in their homes too, playing with the babies and helping to prepare food for the teachers and other VSers.<sup>1</sup>

It seemed a miracle to me that I was now actually a student at Tidings of Peace Christian School. How well I remembered the day I heard that the Mennonites were planning to start a school. I so wanted to attend, but knew that Mom would never be able to stretch her meager income to pay tuition at a private school. I watched as the school opened and gradually began to increase in attendance. How I longed to be a part of it!

Finally one day I had summoned my courage and approached Brother Clayton. “May I come to your school?” I asked. “I don’t have much money, but I’ll work to pay my way if you’ll let me come.” After he talked it over with the school board and others in charge, a plan was devised by which I could work my way through school. The change was made, and how thrilled I had been!

But that had not been the end of my turmoil. Many times through those early days as a student at Tidings of Peace, I found myself caught between two worlds. The life I lived at home in the evenings and on weekends was vastly different from the life my teachers encouraged me to follow. Many times, Miss Shelly reminded us, “The

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1 VSers (pronounced *vee essers*): Abbreviation for young people doing Voluntary Service for the church.

choices you make *today* will directly affect who you will be *tomorrow!*”

I thought on that subject now. My graduation was approaching; my four years in the haven of Tidings of Peace Christian School were drawing to a close. *Where am I going?* I asked myself again. *What choices can I make today in order to get to where I desire to be tomorrow?* I knew, deep within my heart, that I wanted to be a part of the Mennonite Church and serve God in the way I had seen lived out before me, but how could I get there? It all looked so confusing . . . so *big* . . . so overwhelming.

“Jeanie!” It was my sister’s voice, calling from the bottom of the steps. “Jeanie! Are you up there?”

Reluctantly I allowed myself to be drawn back to the present. The sorting out would have to wait. My oasis of quiet was gone for the moment, but I knew that sometime I would return to find answers. I turned my heart to God in prayer, telling Him about the desires of my heart and asking Him to somehow make a way for me to become a part of the Mennonite Church if that was His will for my life.

“Jeanie!” The call was more insistent. “Jeanie! Viva’s here!”

“Coming, Steph!” I called back as I prepared to catch my ride to my after-school job at the carnival. *What will God do with my prayer? Will I ever have a different kind of life than I do now?* I wondered.



Graduation day at Tidings of Peace came and went. I continued to live with Jake and Viva, my employers at the