



Lenten Conversations

Compiled from interviews by Melodie M. Davis

in Another Way Newspaper Column

Interviews previously used on Shaping Families radio program

Plus a bonus monologue: The Rooster's Crow

Lenten Conversations:

Stanley Hauerwas on Prayers for Our Children

Can you imagine going to bed at night not sure if you or your child will be alive the next day?

Stanley Hauerwas is a renowned theologian, prolific author, and a distinguished professor emeritus from Duke University in Durham, North Carolina.

Over the years I've been fortunate to interview some folks with names you might recognize. Sometimes the interviews were for TV documentaries we worked on at Mennonite Media, or for the Shaping Families radio program. For the six weeks of Lent I'm sharing highlights from some of those encounters.

I first became aware of Stanley Hauerwas's writing and work when he and Will Willimon wrote the noteworthy and prophetic book *Resident Aliens: A Provocative Christian Assessment of Culture and Ministry for People Who Know that Something is Wrong* (Abingdon Press) in the late 80s. This now being 2017, perhaps I should note that Hauerwas and Willimon were not talking of immigrants here, but rather how Christians all are perhaps aliens living in a culture away from our true home in God's kingdom or heaven.

Hauerwas's lofty books and highly respected teaching didn't stop him from living a nightmare. He endured the difficult personal trauma facing many families living with someone with bipolar illness. Both he and his son have deep faith and gratefulness for the prayers of friends and colleagues who rallied to their support in those days.

"Prayer meant everything to me," Hauerwas said in his interview. "I know that I would not have survived without intercessory prayer, I just know that. So we can always pray for one another in that way."

Fast forward to 2012 when his memoir, *Hannah's Child* had just been published, and he was speaking to a group of Mennonites meeting in Raleigh at North Carolina State University. The topic of that book was more domestic, not only about Dr. Hauerwas's childhood, but how he came to deal with his wife's mental illness.

In *Hannah's Child*, he writes about his own mother, named Hannah. Like Hannah in 1 Samuel, chapter 2, Hauerwas's mother prayed for a son and promised to devote her life to raising that son for God. Hauerwas jokes, "That was perfectly appropriate, but why did she have to tell me about it when I was *just six*?" Later in life he learned how those prayers, and even being told of her dreams for him, surely "had a great shaping on my life. It took me many years to understand that's the way it's supposed to work."

Think of the Psalm that goes, "Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be," (Psalms 139:5). Jeremiah was also told, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations" (v.1:5).

Hauerwas' father was a brick layer and at first Hauerwas was inclined to follow in his father's footsteps. I loved the tribute Hauerwas gave his father in our interview:

My father was a wonderful, gentle man, who was in a very hard line of work. He was a craftsman of first order, and when I was taken on the job when I was seven, you have to learn all the subsidiary skills of the laborer before you're allowed to lay brick. My father was a little hesitant to teach me because he wanted me to go on to college and didn't want me into the money [of bricklaying]. But I learned from my father essential work habits that have stayed with me my whole life.

I have no doubt that this early introduction to hard work did help Hauerwas as he lived through the manic episodes in his first marriage until his wife left him. He also credits his parents as instrumental for his calling: "My mother and father exemplified for me a very straightforward and unapologetic dedication of lives shaped by the church and the gospel, which always stayed with me. Their faith always gave them something to do. That is what faith does. It gives you something to do. Just think how wonderful that is, to have something to do with your life. You don't have to make it up."

What were or are your prayers for your children? Reflect on Psalm 139:5: "All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be."

Lenten Conversations:

Mike Berenstain of “Bear” Book Fame

I was surprised when I learned that Mike Berenstain was to be commencement speaker at my alma mater, Eastern Mennonite University in 2011. But his son was graduating so I was pleased when Mike took time out of a very busy weekend for an interview for our little radio program, Shaping Families. I had to think how the stories and artwork he and his parents created were quite significant in shaping my own little family!

Berenstain Bear books were an almost nightly ritual at our house for a number of years. I still have 19 of the lovable books which teach so many good values, awaiting the years when my own grandsons will enjoy them. Both of the older Berenstains, Stan and Jan, who wrote and illustrated the books, are now deceased (Mike’s father in 2005 and mother in 2012). Mike counts it a privilege to have worked with them after the books spun off into TV shows and other products. He said his parents could barely keep up with the demands on their time in the late 80s. They never pushed Mike into the “family business” but he chose to study illustration in art school, and briefly worked in design for Random House. There he learned the ropes of publishing children’s books.

As a kid, Mike was amused when fans would assume the Berenstain bears somehow represented Stan and Jan’s own family. People would say to Mike, “Well, are you Brother Bear?” Mike told me, “I always said, well, no, I have an older brother. So I must be Sister Bear.” Mike said his own kids took bear comparisons mostly in stride, enjoying the attention their grandparents received as the famous illustrator/authors.

I was interested in how Mike came to launch a separate line of Berenstain Bear books which are more directly religious. His father was culturally of Jewish background and his mother raised Episcopalian. Mike explained that “they taught us ethics from the Judeo-Christian tradition, but they dealt with their mixed marriage by really not teaching us religion.” But as an adult, Mike became a Christian and later in publishing, he wanted to express his own faith and launched “Living Lights” through Zondervan Publishers.

Mike recalled the Berenstains had received an immense amount of feedback from people over the years saying that they would like books with a more overt faith message. “A huge proportion of our audience—our most dedicated, faithful audience—were people of very traditional backgrounds,” Mike pointed out.

There are about 12 original classic Berenstain Bear books that have been perennial best sellers. “But of the more recent ones, the Living Lights faith books are the most popular,” Mike commented.

It was encouraging to hear that even though he wasn’t taught specific Christian faith stories as a child, his work has now been helpful for parents in raising their children to love God and follow Christ’s basic teachings. Lent and Easter traditions and activities can be special times to bring attention to Christian faith and stories from the Bible.

This author added, “It’s very important that [in teaching good values] you try to give kids books that will give them a story which is attractive, entertaining, and interesting. It’s much less effective to give a kid a lecture.” Of course!

Mike is my age (born the same month in 1951) and if he is able to continue coming up with great story lines and ideas as long as his parents did (well into their 80s), he won’t be retiring anytime soon. His mother always quipped when she was asked if she was going to retire, “I think I’ll retire and take up painting!”

When I interviewed Mike, his mother was still living. He gave her great credit as she continued to paint. He said his mother would always be a “much better illustrator because she had so much more experience.”

Mike’s faith story brings me to several verses from the poetry of Isaiah 46:4 and 9-10. The verses concern the time when the children of Israel were in captivity in Babylon. “I will still be carrying you when you are old. Your hair will turn gray, and I will still carry you. I made you, and I will carry you to safety. ... I am God, and there is no other; ... I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come.” We can take comfort that no matter what comes in the world, in our families, or with our aging bodies, God is there.

Who is “carrying” you? Or how are you supporting others?

Lenten Conversations:

Martin Marty on Family Time

One of the persons I felt most privileged to interview several years ago was Dr. Martin Marty, longtime editor, prolific author, and columnist at *Christian Century* magazine. That he would agree to an interview with a pretty much unknown writer/producer says something about his humble spirit. Among many laurels, The University of Chicago Divinity School named their institute for advanced research in the study of religion “The Martin Marty Center.”

As a Lutheran, Marty was named of course for Martin Luther, the great reformer. 2017 marks 500 years since Martin Luther wrote and nailed his “95 Theses” (on why the church needed reforming) to the door of the Wittenberg church in Germany. What an inspirational model for the young Martin Marty.

For years I enjoyed his weekly “M.E.M.O” column in the *Christian Century* and now contributes to the Sightings column. I admit that his writing is sometimes too thick and academic for my inadequate brain.

Yet I will forever treasure his humor, his spirit (he always seems to be smiling as if keeping a secret joke), and his willingness to welcome me into his Chicago condo and office looking out on a glorious view of Lake Michigan. I recorded an interview for the Mennonite church’s radio program on family issues, a denominational group which Marty respects highly. Marty also wrote the foreword for my book, *Whatever Happened to Dinner: Recipes and Reflections for Family Mealtimes*.

I started by asking Marty where he grew up: “I have a very strong sense of place and heritage, and though I’m very far from it, every day I somehow draw on my Nebraska roots,” he replied with feeling.

The Martys lived in a small town, but the children spent summers on the farms of relatives. It was the 1930s Dust Bowl era, and Marty says his parents had to have felt the agony of the Depression: “But we children were kind of protected from that.” His father went to summer school every year, so for six weeks he and his siblings were “farmed out” to relatives (grandfather and an aunt and uncle) on literal Nebraska farms. “They were almost a parallel family to us,” said Marty. They lived 65 miles away and it was costly to buy gas to go that far. “So summer was

just unbroken pleasure on the farm. It was a warm, rich community environment, everybody knew everybody, and took care of each other,” Marty noted.

Marty and Elsa (his first wife, who died of cancer), also had the goal and joy of camping in almost every state with five kids plus two who joined the family as foster children. “We got to all states except Hawaii and Alaska, (and forgot Delaware!),” he recalled. Marty reflected: “If you take a three-or-so-week camping trip with each other, you really get to know each other. Each had his own assignment on tent set-ups and camping gear and so on.” Marty is happy to observe his children following the camping tradition with their own families.

At one point the Martys had seven boys aged 9-14 around the table every night. “My sainted wife managed that more than I did, although the kids always remember how every day when I came home, we’d toss the football. We lived near parks and had a swimming pool; of course a lot of friends came over.”

Even though Marty traveled a lot because of his professional life, he worked very hard to spend time with the family together, and on an individual basis. The children took turns traveling with him on business when it could be arranged. They also didn’t watch television during the week. “They’d watch hockey on Saturday some, but we watched very little during the week. We had a reading circle every night around the table.”

As Lutherans I’m sure they observed a “Holy Lent” and read frequently from the Bible. They enjoyed rich discussions involving theology, the world, and how Christians should put faith into action. I’m also sure they argued as well (because we all do)—even Mary and Martha in the oft-told story of Jesus visiting their home—for a meal when Martha was all a flutter with meal prep. Mary, however, relished sitting at the feet of Jesus to hear his teachings and stories. Let us ponder Christ’s words to them: “Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away.” (Luke 10:41-42).

What are you most treasured times with others, or with Jesus?

Lenten Conversations:

Ken Medema on Really Listening

I first heard Ken Medema’s incredible music and stories at a Mennonite Church convention. I say incredible because I don’t know of another excellent musician who can listen to someone telling a story and then make up meaningful lyrics and simple tunes while singing in front of a crowd—and have them turn out so very well. Plus there’s the blind thing but he’s never let that stop him.

Now in his 70’s, Ken performs piano and voice concerts across the U.S. and Canada, and has recorded many albums. One of my close friends used to be a booking agent for a comedy duo at similar venues and through her connections and assistance, I was able to record an interview with Ken. He broke into a number of on-the-spot made up songs even during our interview, which I loved! But I was especially charmed when he explained how that act of listening so intently until he caught the “nub” of a story is also a helpful and practical skill in relationships: with a spouse, children, friends, and even enemies. I dare say it was also a gift that Jesus possessed in spades—something to remind ourselves as we journey through Lent

For example, Ken and his wife Jane have greatly differing personalities. Ken is basically an introvert who, while he enjoys people immensely, after leaving a concert or crowd, needs to retreat into his own skin. He said Jane, on the other hand, is such a talkative people-person that she doesn’t know “what she thinks until she says it.” Jane needs people around with a lot of interaction, because that’s how she thrives. “And I can’t thrive unless I have lots of time alone,” Ken described.

So if Jane, for example (or either spouse in a marriage) is dishing out “a catalog of the ‘you don’ts,’ such as ‘You don’t send me flowers, you don’t seem to have interest in some of the things I talk about, you don’t seem to like the books I read,’ –how do I respond?” asks Ken.

Suddenly in that conversation, Ken said he hears an undertone of “I feel kind of second rate.” He said to look for a key like that in any disagreement. “I feel second rate” or “less than” or “not appreciated.”

Ken went on: “Rather than responding to her with ‘Oh yes I love your cooking, I love the books you read’—I can respond with ‘I feel kind of

overwhelmed, because you are so full of energy and ideas and my mind is so slow sometimes, I feel overwhelmed.” Those kinds of words—overwhelmed, second rate, can be keys to turn a brewing fight into a conversation “and then we can work together at figuring out what’s going on rather than just making accusations,” Ken noted.

Ken shared how he listens to people and their stories the same way. “I hear a nub, I hear a little phrase, I hear the central focus of what the person is trying to say.” And that gives him a key phrase out of which to make a song!

In 2010, Ken and his wife were invited to move in with the family of one of their children. In this setting of living with loved ones but needing to work out some of the kinks of three generations in a household, he enumerated the advantages. “Kids are hard to raise,” Ken stated. “But when you’ve got four adults who basically agree on how to raise a kid, when one adult gets tired, another can take over” which is a huge help. In this setting he and Jane would say to the adult children, “You guys get out of here, go see a movie. We’ll take care of the kids.” Ken remarked, “The relief is palpable. It’s amazing how that works.”

He added, “When differences crawl all over us, we both can find our satisfaction being together among the kids and grandkids, and it brings us together in better ways.”

Ken and his wife have enjoyed many years together even though there were rough times. Their central focus has been serving God and the church. I can think of no better scripture for this Lenten meditation than John 13:34 where Jesus says, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.” Or as Ken sung at this point in our conversation:

We’re such different people, but we’ve so much to share.
Sometimes I’m frightened, and sometimes it’s more than I can bear.
And yet I belong to you, and you belong to me,
And we both belong to Jesus, so let’s learn how to be a family.

How do you practice deep listening with family and friends? What lessons have you learned?

Visit Ken’s website at <http://kenmedema.com/>

Lenten Conversations:

John Perkins on Forgiveness

He had one of the most terrifying opening lines ever for a story: “One of the sheriffs took a ... pistol and cocked it to the side of my head and pulled the trigger. ... in my mind I was a dead person.”

Speaking was John Perkins, a well known champion of social justice and reconciliation—who dealt personally with racial brutality in Mississippi in the 1960s.

I did several phone interviews with John Perkins preparing a producer for a 2001 documentary which aired on ABC-TV, *Journey Toward Forgiveness*. I also heard him speak at an American Bible Society meeting and shared a taxi ride with him to the airport.

John grew up in the south where his brother, Clyde, was killed by a town marshall after a disturbance in a movie theater line. Clyde had fought in World War II and had a difficult time readjusting to life in Mississippi where, as a black, he was expected to conform and stay quiet. John was devastated and angry after his brother was killed. His parents, who had been sharecroppers in the ‘30s, wisely encouraged him to move to California; eventually he served with the military in Korea, became a Christian, and then married Vera Mae back home in Mendenhall, Mississippi, and became a pastor.

John believed strongly in encouraging people to help themselves; in such a role he helped organize an economic boycott. He was briefly jailed in Mendenhall, and then some students were arrested for organizing a similar boycott in a nearby city. John drove to the jailhouse to help the students make bond and the sheriff “couldn’t believe that I would come back to make bond,” John recalled. “I didn’t have any understanding of the hostility that these people had.”

The guards started beating John and the two others who were trying to post bond. “They started beating us ... the sheriff began to curse us and say, ‘This is that smart _____. This is a new ball game [here]. This is not Mendenhall. You are in my county now.’”

The sheriff had cocked the gun at John’s head and at one point a fork was shoved up his nose. He was kicked repeatedly in the groin. In the eyes of his tormentors, John saw hatred.

“That hatred frightened me. You get just a little glimpse of it and say, ‘I don’t want that dark place in my own life.’ I made a bargain with God that night, I was so fearful. I was thinking I was gonna be killed. And I said, ‘God, if you’ll let me out of this jail, I really want to preach a Gospel that is stronger than my race, stronger than my economic interest. I wanna preach a Gospel that can reconcile black and whites together in the body of Christ.’”

What I admire so very much is that out of this experience, John started a foundation which still works at reconciliation between races, justice, and development for all.

John explained further, “Reconciliation to me is not so much for the white people I encountered. It is really for myself. I saw that hate in the eyes of the people that tortured me and I could feel myself needing to hate them back.” He went on, “I felt a weight on me. I began to recognize that and really hear the Scripture that says, ‘Unless you can forgive those who trespass against you, how do you expect your heavenly Father to forgive you?’”

John emphasized that forgiveness was his way to shed hatred from his own life. “Forgiveness frees me,” he said. “Not only have I been loved by God, but I’ve been loved by God’s people.” John used his nightmare to help others latch onto the freeing experience of forgiveness.

After hearing John’s story, it restored my hope and faith that people could get along across the many boundaries that divide us. He went beyond reconciliation to preach that unless people are empowered to pursue economic development, they will continue to struggle in many realms. John never received a college degree, but I could see he had the wisdom of a Solomon.

I still grieve and stress over the racial injustice we find in our world, and work to reach across boundaries for better understanding and more harmony. In this Lenten season as we move closer to the special time of remembering Christ’s death on the cross, we can reflect on how Jesus also turned to those who tortured him and forgave them. It’s a way to find new freedom and love.

Who do you need to forgive? Or how can you seek reconciliation?

Find out more about the John and Vera Mae Perkins Foundation at
<https://jvmpf.org/>

Lenten Conversations:

Almeda Wright on Helping Teens Live Faith

Almeda Wright is the youngest of the influential Christians we're hearing from in this series for Lent. So, likely you have not heard of her yet but her influence and vision for helping us understand teens and faith today will spread as she teaches religion at Yale Divinity School.

She is the daughter of a deacon (Baptist) who checked on her religious life while she was in college by asking during Sunday evening phone calls, "How was church?" She loved math and engineering and went to Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) for her undergrad work.

Her academic work for her doctorate included extensive study and research on faith and youth with youth leaders who participated in a faith based leadership development camp. She asked these youth—admittedly a group inclined to be much more religious than average—how they had experienced God in their personal lives. Over 90 percent said they had personally experienced the presence of God: sometimes in things such as a test in school (her favorite answer) but also in worship, nature, and personal prayer. They recognized God's blessing in their lives. They were also the kind of kids who were active and involved in service projects and helping others.

But, these youth rarely if at all connected their personal faith to problems in the larger culture like racism, drugs, or poverty. Her hunch was they hadn't been encouraged to make those connections and to figure out what Christians could be doing to make a difference. She also felt that too often, the personal relationship with Jesus is seen as what's important. Wright believes absolutely that a personal bond and belief is important, but wants people to take their faith further into the world.

Today's youth (in contrast to earlier times) have parents whose major creed may be translated as "play nice in the sandbox," Wright half joked. The religious beliefs of the youth are separated from their experiences of an evil like racism, or they absorb that religious faith is just private. She believes churches and parents can help teach teens the link between a personal faith and making positive changes in the world.

What gave Wright her tremendous sense of the importance of faith in all of life? Her whole extended family—cousins, aunts, and uncles were all part of her church. "So on Sunday we were going to church and on Wednesday Bible study, and on Saturday there was youth group or choir or an usher meeting," she described. "I remember singing and leading worship as early as five."

She went to a Catholic school for awhile and there religion was taught across the curriculum, including making crosses out of straws or macaroni, things like that, and was immersed in many religious traditions and rituals.

Yet her path to teaching in the field of religion was not clear cut. While studying engineering at MIT, she took a semester off from her major to study art, history, and religions broadly (Christianity and Islam) in Spain. When she got back to MIT, she finished her degree in engineering, but wasn't sure what to do after.

Because of her strong beliefs, she considered ministry, but three things were holding her back. "I'm a Baptist and I'm black and I'm from the south and that means that there were not women in ministry in my tradition. It wasn't even something that I could foresee as an option." Of course in Massachusetts she did see women in ministry, and "all of these things came together" to give Wright a new idea of how to serve God with her life. She was ordained for teaching and pastoral ministry.

Most of us don't have firm ideas while younger of how to put together personal faith with a path of serving God, but over time it becomes clearer. But it won't if kids are not exposed to these ideas from an early age. "Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it" the old Proverb goes (22:6, NIV). While that does not always happen, we can use the traditions of Lent and Easter and other religious holidays to "teach your children young" as the old Crosby, Stills and Nash lyrics go. Another line from that song echoes Wright's message, "You ... must have a code that you can live by." *Find a YouTube with Wright at <https://youtu.be/DE5fp9VDRGU>*

What code do you most want to instill in your children or grandchildren?

Bonus: A Lenten Monologue: The Rooster's Crow

Me and my big mouth.

My mom always said I got it from Dad's side. My dad always said I got it from Mom's side. It doesn't matter whose side I got it from, but my mouth could sure get me in trouble. You might know me as the disciple Peter, in the Bible.

But you have to understand, I didn't really know *then* what I know now.

Even when I lucked out when Jesus asked who we thought he really was and I responded, "You are the Christ!" he praised my answer but I don't think I really understood what I'd said. I mean I *felt* that I spoke the truth, but didn't really grasp it. That's why I messed up so soon right after, scolding our master for talking about how he was going to be killed and he rebuked me, "Get behind me, Satan." That was the lowest I ever felt—until the crow of the cock.

But the really bad part was he said I was gonna do it. And if you've ever known someone like me, the worst thing you can do is tell me I'm going to react a certain way. He said we would all fall away and old big-mouth-Peter had to say, "Nope, not me."

"I tell you the truth," Jesus answered with a kind, knowing, motherly face, "that tonight before the rooster crows, you'll disown me three times." And we all swore we never would, like a bunch of silly sheep.

Then we had that awful episode in the Garden—I mean, here was our best friend, and leader, who meant everything to us, and we all kept zonking out on him. It was like trying to keep awake in synagogue, and we felt so guilty but just couldn't help it. (In our defense, he *did* keep a pretty demanding schedule.)

And then his arrest, and everything happened so fast, and our dream was just falling apart—it was like a nightmare, everything all confused, we didn't know what was happening.

And then that servant girl by the fire. As soon as I saw her there watching me, I knew she'd start grilling me, and it would be all over town, and I just wanted to get her off my back. I said, "I don't understand what you're talking about!" And then someone said we sounded like we were from his part of the country and another said *surely* we were Jesus' disciples.

"Man!" I swore. "I do not know that man!"

And then came the piercing crow of the cock.

The previous three years passed before my eyes like I was dying. I *was* dying inside. I thought of the day my brother and I first met Jesus. And the day he came to my mother-in-law's house, and healed her! And the night we thought *we* were all dying on the lake, or the times we'd all end up at someone's house and have those wonderful all-night talks around a fire.

The stories! What a way with words. And the way he put those Pharisees in their place—and anyone, really; even his family and friends, if the occasion called for it. A master of words. And kindness. His way with children. The mountain top with Elijah and Moses! That day at Caesarea Philippi. Sigh. The best three years of my life.

To deny all that, that was about as low as a friend could go. But then you wouldn't know anything about that, would you? You're better than that. But I'm so glad I didn't do what Judas did. I was tempted though, you know, to do myself in rather than see the pained look in his eyes after my denial.

I'll make it up to him. This big old mouth will make it up to him, or die trying. I *will* make it up to him. Just you see. Easter's coming!

Biblical references: Matthew 16: 16 and 23; 26:34; Luke 22:54-62

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