An Essential Stranger, Yes: Nick Lindsay at Goshen College, 1969-2000

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Abstract: From 1969-2000 Nick Lindsay served as writer-in-residence in the English Department at Goshen College, where he taught many of poets associated with the recent flourishing of contemporary Mennonite literature. This essay by a former student considers institutional history and interviews with Lindsay's proteges and former colleagues in an effort to trace the contours of Lindsay's aesthetic and theological influence. Lindsay's poem "A Song of Opposites" provides conceptual scaffolding for an anecdotal consideration of Lindsay's relationship with the community at Goshen—a relationship that is described as analogous to the relationship constructed by metaphor, a joining wherein difference is as important as resemblance, and proximity reveals new insight into both elements. Of special concern are Lindsay's beliefs about work, academic achievement, poetics, peace and violence, and Christian faith.

A Song of Opposites

What's the opposite of salt?
The opposite of salt is a silver bell.

What's the opposite of a squirrel?
The opposite of a squirrel is a burned brick.

What's the opposite of a woman?
The opposite of a woman is ever after.

(Goshen, 1969)[1]

In "A Song of Opposites," one of his most memorable poems, former Goshen College writer-in-residence Nick Lindsay presents what William Blake called "contraries" to express the dualistic nature of creation. Like Blake, Lindsay seeks neither resolution nor synthesis—light does not merely overcome the darkness—but, instead, he offers emblematic pairs in tension. Out of their play emerges the energy that fuels creativity and

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1. Nick Lindsay, *Magnificent Storm: Selected Poems, 1960-2000* (Goshen, Ind.: Pinchpenny Press, 2000), 71. This volume also includes a bibliography of Lindsay's publications.

life.[2] This principle is also illustrated in his 1969 concrete poem where "yes" is made of many "nos" (Fig. 1).[3]

Fig. 1

Amid the antiwar movement and following the summer of love, this poem appeared as a graphic reminder that affirmation cannot exist without refusal. The contrary images in the "Song of Opposites" carry rich, sometimes personal symbolic meanings. Readers unaware of Lindsay's cosmology nonetheless see or feel that the relationship between a lively squirrel, flicking its tail or leaping from limb to limb, and a static, square, burned brick can only be one of opposition. That sort of intuitive and analogic seeing, grounded in material experience and the collective unconscious, is essential to understanding this kind of poetry. The poem's structure—interrogation, catechism, or call and response—follows oral, conversational form, rather than written, discursive convention, and thus enacts yet another contrary. For as much as Nick was a writer, he was even more a shamanistic performer of poetry and song, those arts that existed long before inscription.

For some thirty years, 1969-2000, Nick Lindsay served as writer-in-residence at Goshen College, first as a full-time instructor and then in various abbreviated terms. A list of his former students includes many of the poets now identified with the flowering of contemporary Mennonite literature, such as Jeff Gundy, David Waltner-Toews, Shari

2. For conversations that helped me to conceptualize this paper, I thank Jeff Gundy, who mentioned Blake's contraries in relation to Nick Lindsay, and Don Yost, who stressed the notion of tension rather than resolution with regard to Lindsay's dualistic world view.

3. Nick Lindsay, *YES* ([Bloomington, Ind.]: Nick Lindsey, 1967), title page.

Miller Wagner, Barbara Nickel, Carmen Horst, Jessica Smucker and others.[4] I, too, was his student, and this essay is my attempt to describe his presence among us—an improvisational song and dance of opposites, the significance of which has not yet been reckoned. He was so charismatic and strange, so unlike our parents and teachers, so unlike our rational selves, that he could shock, offend and enchant us all at once. One colleague, communication professor J. Daniel Hess, recalled a disastrous attempt to team-teach a course with John Fisher and Nick. A lecture for first-year general education students devolved into "a mix of seemingly impromptu guitar, symbol, story, allusion and emotional fire that confused us all"—at least according to Hess, who writes of Nick, "I found him as difficult to converse with as [Mennonite theologian] John Howard Yoder. I never knew whether I was talking with the essential Nick or one who was acting a role. (This is not pejorative. I respect actors)."[5] The incommensurability of Nick Lindsay and his Mennonite students—a difference that had as much to do with style as substance—may be what made his influence so profound.

Lindsay's relationship with the Goshen community may best be understood as parallel to the sort of relationship that metaphor establishes. He was different enough to surprise and challenge, yet similar enough to strike us as right and wise, even when we could not rationally explain why. (An affirmation composed of many small refusals has an affinity with Anabaptism, does it not?) He arrived in 1969, when Goshen students and faculty were distressed by American policies at home and abroad, and as the college was becoming more deeply involved with the wider world: one year after students in the first official Study Service Trimester units were sent to Central America and one year before J. Lawrence Burkholder was recruited from Harvard Divinity School to become the college's president. With regard to literary art, Nick was a catalyst if not the spark, and this essay emerges from a question: what was it about Nick and his poetics—in relation to the Mennonite ethos—that nurtured a profusion of poetry and spiritual poetics for thirty years? More work needs to be done to answer this question, perhaps by a literary scholar or theologian; what follows here is a context and commentary—the consequence of archival research,

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4. In the Afterword of her recent anthology of Mennonite poetry, Ann Hostetler described Lindsay's influential role at the college and beyond: "More than any other single poet, he began to convince large groups of Mennonites that poetry has a place in their midst."—*A Cappella: Mennonite Voices in Poetry* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2003), 177.

5. J. Daniel Hess, e-mail message to author, Sept. 15, 2006. In an interview by author, Dec. 17, 2006, Nick recalled that Hess stood up and interrupted the lecture in question before it had a chance to unfold.

interviews and correspondence with former students and colleagues—organized by the three questions and answers that constitute the stanzas of Nick's "Song of Opposites."[6]

WHAT'S THE OPPOSITE OF SALT? THE OPPOSITE OF SALT IS A SILVER BELL

This question expresses a central tension in Nick's life. In its simplest terms, salt represents work for wages; the silver bell is art and high literary culture. Nick was born in 1927, the son of visionary bard Vachel Lindsay and his young wife, schoolteacher and poet Elizabeth Conner Lindsay, also called "Lyssa" for the "wolf-muse who drives men to poetry and madness," in Nick's words.[7] In debt and suffering paranoid psychosis, Vachel Lindsay took his own life in 1931 when Nick, the youngest of two children, was four years old. By thirteen, Nick had learned to build boats and houses from Ralph Mann, a carpenter from the African-American community in Yonkers, New York, who worked as a janitor at the school Nick attended with his sister. Throughout the Great Depression, Nick helped his mother support the family by this trade; according to him, his father's debts were not paid in full until 1945, when at the age of eighteen, Nick married Frances Dubose, a fellow student at the University of North Carolina. Lifelong companion and collaborator, DuBose is recognized as a powerful presence in Nick's work and teaching by many who knew the couple at Goshen. The Lindsays began a family almost immediately; of their eleven children, ten survive.

For Nick, the salt of labor is inseparable from the provision of the financial and material means for domestic life. The silver bell refers not only to art but also to the artistic milieu, including the bohemian entourage that surrounded his parents, as well as the academic theatrical community Nick entered by way of a dramatic art scholarship at the University of North Carolina. Both communities seemed disdainful and destructive of the everyday life that supports children and family. Of his unstable artist father, Nick has written, "He's gone off ringing his silver

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6. I thank Joe Springer and Erin Miller at the Mennonite Historical Library for their valuable assistance with this project. Although not all are cited in the final draft, the following former students and colleagues were very helpful in offering their memories of Nick: Dale Bowman, J. R. Burkholder, Jeff Gundy, Carl Haarer, J. Daniel Hess, Carmen Horst, Dennis Huffman, Jessica Lazar, Gail Janzen Newel, Jeff Peachey, Philip Ruth, Shari Miller Wagner, David Waltner-Toews, Don Yost and Melanie Zuercher. In addition, Ervin Beck, Rich and Brenda Meyer, and Elizabeth Wenger graciously consented to interviews in the Goshen area; John and Pauline Fisher were interviewed in my home in Bellefonte, Pa.

7. Nick Lindsay, personal correspondence to author, July, 2005.

bell into the Land of Darkness."[8] Of himself and DuBose in those early days, he wrote:

> I—a carpenter then of eighteen and working my forty hours a week, 75 cents an hour and payday every Friday; she a ripening young mother. We, living on a diet of good hamburger, canned peas, and kisses. What that gang of artsy academics scorned utterly. Our work day starts at six, I'm driving nails by eight, but them? They don't get up till eleven o'clock every morning and try to keep us up till one AM. . . . The book people. Let them go their way with their soundless shapes on their page; as for us, we choose the way of salt sweat and honey kisses.[9]

Nick had suffered early the price of artistic celebrity, which poet Robert Graves had explained to his mother in archetypal terms after Vachel Lindsay's death. The wolf people need a charismatic figure, such as an artist or priest, to stand at the center of their rituals. Typically that figure—a cipher, a hollow place—is stripped of mate or offspring in the audience's imagination. Nick writes, "If this hollow place is named, 'the son of the poet,' or 'the daughter of the preacher,' too bad for the wife/lover/husband, the flesh and blood daughter or son-in-law or grandchildren."[10] Seeking a place supportive of the salty labors of domestic and economic necessity, in 1955 the Lindsays settled on Edisto Island, off the coast of South Carolina, a place Nick describes as:

> the epicenter of anti-literacy east of the Mississippi. . . . where we [could] raise horseback children, no building codes, but it's all between me and the possibility of excellence & God Almighty & the salt tides, here where 9/10 of us are black, 8/10 are poverty, 7/10 Christian & no more than 3/10 live in the kingdom of fear.[11]

American Mennonites knew plenty about salt—the sweat salt of farm work as well as salt-of-the-earth piety—but had produced few silver bells of their own by May of 1969, when Nick drove up from Bloomington with his self-published chapbook *Yes* and his wife and children to perform his father's and his own poetry as part of Goshen College's Lecture-Music series. The evening included renditions of biblical narratives such as Daniel in the Lions' Den, described by English professor John Fisher as "totally disciplined minimal enactments that for this new audience were quite compellingly, if strangely, authentic." By

8. Ibid.

9. Nick Lindsay, personal correspondence to author, July, 2005.

10. According to Nick, the destructive nature of an audience's appetite and that danger for artists is the subject of Igmar Bergman's 1968 film, *The Hour of the Wolf.* Lindsay, interview by author, 17 Decc. 2006.

11. Ibid.

the end of the evening, Nick had his audience chanting the refrain of "The Rich Man, the Hungry Man and the Angel."[12] During that visit, he also spoke to classes and met with a faculty group studying the liberal arts and theology, after which, one member described his contribution to that circle as "inscrutable." Nonetheless, Fisher, then chair of the department and already familiar with Nick's work through his "spot-on" recordings of his father's platform pieces, invited Nick to return in the fall to help cover courses created by faculty leaves. Nick had been studying French literature in the graduate program at Indiana University and working as an electrician, carpenter, and factory laborer at the Dr. Pepper plant in Bloomington. "Goshen has hired a carpenter to teach English," announced Nick to the *Goshen College Record*, dramatizing the contrary that he (and maybe Jesus, too) embodied.[13]

Everything about the Lindsays unsettled common assumptions at Goshen.[14] In the late 1960s, most Mennonites were not far from rural life, manual labor and large families, but many faculty members had chosen a more assimilated professional path and academic ambition. They were serious scholars who venerated high culture produced by others, elsewhere.[15] Most looked to the Anabaptist movement as the source of Mennonite identity and valued that European past, notably characterized by refusal, challenge and persecution. In contrast, the Lindsays were unabashedly American, from the South, and, although Nick came with his own refusals and challenges, he was a booming, charismatic performer of the vernacular idiom. With their earthy ways and cosmopolitan ties, the Lindsays defied categories: in addition to having a famous father, Nick quoted personal conversations with Robert Frost and other literary luminaries; DuBose was cousin to the distinguished author and *Porgy and Bess* librettist DuBose Heyward. Someone in Goshen told me that if DuBose wanted to see the family silver, she'd have to go to the Metropolitan Museum in New York City. ("Yankee loot, 1865!" Nick would thunder if he were nearby.)

Dale Bowman, a country boy from Lancaster County who is now a Chicago journalist, noted the significance for Mennonite writers of

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12. John Fisher, in an e-mail message to author, Dec. 18, 2006. "The Rich Man, The Hungry Man and the Angel" can be found in *Magnificent Storm*, p. 39.

13. "Carpenter–poet Lindsay finds home in GC English department," *Goshen College Record*, Dec. 12, 1969.

14. Unflappable John Fisher complicates this perception with a view to the larger cultural context: "Nick's presence among us in his early Goshen years may not have been so much shocking--as, ironically, its serious sustainable impact was in subsequent years--as simply a not unexpected sign of the times."—e-mail message to author, Dec. 15, 2006.

15. A significant exception is Ervin Beck, with his abiding and serious attention to preserving Mennonite and Amish folklore and material culture.

Nick's cultural capital: ". . . there was some clout to being able to say the poet-in-residence at my college was Nick Lindsay, the son of Vachel. . . . [who] even now means something out here. . . . The godfather of all liberal thinking in Chicago, Studs Terkel, did a piece in one of his books on Nick, and that means something out here too."[16] That piece, published in Terkel's *Working*, features Nick recalling his work building concrete forms for the construction of the hydrogen bomb plant in South Carolina, 1950-1954. A member of the firmly pacifist Goshen faculty when he was interviewed, Nick demurred, "I might be persuaded it was inappropriate . . ."; but, in characteristic style, he praised the material and historical complexity that "The Bomb Plant," as Nick called it, represents:

> It was a living wage in that part of the country for the first time since the boll weevil had been through. And boy, you can't down rate that. It seems like the vast comedy of things when a Yankee come and got us to build their H-bomb, part of the fine comedy that [he] should come and give us the first living wage since the War of Northern Aggression—for this.[17]

Nick did not just come from, appreciate or interpret high culture, his performance and poetry were informed by and engaged with it. By example, he encouraged Goshen students to do likewise, viewing the work of literary production as one more form of labor. In the early 1970s, Nick led one of the college's first freshman colloquium courses at a construction site, intending that students take turns reading great works of Russian literature aloud while the others worked as members of the building crew.[18] Lindsay's view of the necessity of work *and* art echoes John Ruskin in *The Stones of Venice*, as well as subsequent American followers of the Arts and Crafts movement: "Life without industry is guilt," wrote Ruskin, "and industry without art is brutality."[19] For Mennonite young people, who may have regarded literature as a luxury with little practical relevance, this vision of literary labor was a redeeming and challenging one. "He taught me how to see poetry as a kind of work, as difficult and as important as good carpentry, poetry as a kind of verbal Habitat for Humanity," writes poet and veterinary epidemiologist David Waltner-Toews.[20]

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16. Dale Bowman, e-mail message to author, Sept. 25, 2006.

17. Studs Terkel, *Working* (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 520.

18. *Goshen College Record*, May 6, 1971, quoted in Susan Fisher Miller, *Culture for Service: A History of Goshen College* (Goshen, Ind.: Goshen College, 1994), 266.

19. *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. T. E. Cook and A. Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1093-12), 17:423; 20:93.

20. David Waltner-Toews, e-mail message to author, Sept. 25, 2006.

One site where manual work and words successfully met was Pinchpenny Press, which Nick established in 1970 to print his own writing and that of his students, following typical independent publishing trends of the time.[21] The early books were often handwritten and illustrated with line drawings by the authors, bound with stitches or staples and construction paper covers, much like Nick's *Yes*, which was also reissued as a Pinchpenny title. Students worked alongside print shop staff—later with typewriters, then computers—to produce their own volumes, which were marketed at readings and the college bookstore. By the fall of 1970, Pinchpenny had released seven books in its first six months; since Nick's departure, the press has continued to thrive, with about 200 volumes now on its backlist.

Merely by their difference, the Lindsays, like all strangers, called the conventions of the local community into question. The youngest Lindsay child—David—was born at home, which was unusual at that time and place; and the family, which included two older sons and three older daughters, lived in a house they rented from the college on Ninth Street. Book conservator and inventor Jeff Peachey, who as a five-year-old child of a faculty member befriended Edward Lindsay, recalled his first visit to the Lindsay household:

> Their house had no front yard, just dirt. . . . Their sofa was not like any I had seen, just covered with some old blankets and books and magazines piled—it was a very comfortable place to hang out. Nick was building a boat in the dining room, on top of a table that he built. Some days the air was thick with the smell of epoxy. There was an odd folk painting of the Garden of Eden in the room as well. Their house was something that later on made me realize that there was a different way to live than a standard middle class, Mennonite lifestyle.[22]

The Lindsays lived more simply than most Goshen Mennonites. Nick spoke openly of money—of pain for the lack of it and the pleasure of payday—and raged against "the rich" with the ire of an Old Testament prophet. He published a piece in the college newspaper about the marginal status of cafeteria and physical plant workers on campus.[23] When the boat on a dining room table in landlocked Indiana was finished, freighted as it must have been with metaphoric meaning, Nick

21. Nick insists that he has been given too much credit for founding Pinchpenny, that it was really John Fisher's vision and "tolerant sanity" that got the press going. Interview with author Dec. 17, 2007.

22. Jeff Peachey, e-mail message to author, Sept. 26, 2006.

23. "Lindsay comments on 'Getting to Know Each Other,'" *Goshen College Record*, Nov. 19, 1970.

removed a picture window to get it out of the house. "He gave us an example and language for resisting the dominant culture," recalled former student and Christian Peacemaker Team activist Rich Meyer. "He was not just opposing the war [in Southeast Asia], but he was resisting Mennonite middle class culture."[24]

Nick's fulltime tenure at Goshen coincided with a period of change among American Mennonites marked by increased engagement with popular culture, political activity and the arts. Church editors and leaders were experimenting with artistic media such as drama, photography and film to promote a distinct Anabaptist cultural identity at the congregational level. In this context, Nick was among the first to refer to Mennonite people as a tribe or clan, rather than as a Christian denomination or sect. "The only good Mennonite is a dead Mennonite," he is said to have declared, with ironic regard to the veneration of Anabaptist martyrdom.[25] In 1971, a Believers Church Festival at Goshen honored the Anabaptist tradition with drama, lectures by historians and sociologists, and twenty-three teach-in style presentations in local Mennonite churches. For the festival, Nick wrote and directed an elaborate litany that drew on Old Testament language and archetypal, organic images of blight and renewal. That year, his poetic manifesto, simply titled "Poetry," was published in *Christian Living* to explain to an uninitiated audience across the Mennonite Church what literature is and what a writer does. Describing the novels of Canadian Mennonite Rudy Wiebe as a form of aesthetic resistance against oppression, he wrote, "They are a fine, aggressive alternative to powder and ball, and more effective than passing out weapons to the community, for as this art aggression is accomplished, it redeems the warfare, releases the oppressor, permits forgiveness and embrace. Poetry is an alternate kind of warfare."[26]

In 1974, Mennonites in Lancaster County founded *Festival Quarterly* in response to what editors Merle and Phyllis Good called "The current burst of art among Mennonite peoples."[27] That year *The Goshen College Record* ran a series of articles grappling with the idea of "Mennonite art."

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24. Rich Meyer, interview with author, May 25, 2006.

25. Jeff Gundy recalls hearing Nick say this during class; his interpretation of the remark is significant: "Not as if he believed it or even thought others 'believed' it in some doctrinaire way, but as an impression he'd garnered about what Mennonites thought and felt about themselves and their history. I had the sense that he was considerably perplexed by this, as well he might be."—E-mail message to author, Dec. 1, 2006. John Fisher has provided further and generous insight into the maxim, "Dead Mennonite = dead Indian. (An interesting speculative insight. Anabaptists seen not as radical reformers but as Adamic inhabitants left behind in the garden.)"—E-mail message to author, Dec. 15, 2006.

26. Nick Lindsay, "Poetry," *Christian Living* (April 1972), 14.

27. "Who decides whether shoes are Mennonite?" *Goshen College Record*, Dec. 13, 1974.

Characteristic headlines asked, "Who decides whether shoes are Mennonite?" and "Menno art: Must plows always plow?"[28] In one of these articles, Nick assessed the traditional scruples of biblical literalism and utilitarianism:

> Mennonites are not by and large a harsh people; but they measure up full measure—red, white and blue—with the rest of America in harshness to art. Those scripture references which they seek in art and do not find are icons, too, you know, the verbal icons of an image worshipping tribal people called the Mennonites—to whom I am so grateful, a healing and excellent people. Nevertheless, let it be noticed that this is so.[29]

Of that time—the early 1970s—Nick wrote, "In the last season of my 100 percent teaching at Goshen, it seemed briefly, that we could have it all—. . . both Salt and Silver Bell. How Dazzling!"[30]

WHAT'S THE OPPOSITE OF A SQUIRREL? THE OPPOSITE OF A SQUIRREL IS A BURNED BRICK

In Nick's cosmology, the squirrel represents life in the present moment: grace, energy, artfulness. His poem "The Transcendentalist," published in a 1973 Pinchpenny volume *Words and the School,* is a parable of education in which a squirrel leaves home and gains "new skills" and a gun, which he uses to blast his nest of origin, destroying both habitation and his own primal form.[31] The hard, straight lines of a burned brick conform with the world of wage labor, politics and institutionalized education. A high school dropout, Nick reflected on that choice in a letter: "Take what you can stand and don't take any more than that. It's what God put the tongue in your mouth for. If it don't taste right, you spit it out."[32] His first spring at Goshen, he appeared at commencement among faculty members—who were dressed up or shrouded in academic robes and hoods—sporting a hooded sweatshirt. Many years later colleague John Fisher chuckled, recalling the newest hire, jauntily marching at the end of the faculty procession, more Puck than professor.

From his first introduction in a 1969 campus newspaper article, Nick's position was clear: "He questions credentials, the Ph. D. as the basis of authority. . . . He finds distasteful the process of rounding up students,

28. Ibid.

29. "Menno art: Must plows always plow?" *Goshen College Record*, Nov. 22, 1974.

30. Nick Lindsay, personal correspondence to author, July, 2005.

31. Nick Lindsay, *Words for the School* (Goshen, Ind.: Pinchpenny Press,1973), 9.

32. Quoted in Terkel, *Working*, 517.

pouring them into one end, stamping them with required courses, and turning them out at the other end with the necessary credentials."[33] Beyond his own experience with institutional higher education, Nick, along with many others, recognized during the Vietnam era "a link between the military money machine and the education certification machine."[34] At least until the 1980s, he was known for several variations of the slogan, "Don't Get Certified! Give 'em Hell!" Even after he had returned to Edisto, the words persisted in oral tradition on campus, once attributed in print to Jack Dueck. The source of the slogan is revealed in an expanded version of Nick's 1971 manifesto "Poetry," published as a preface to the 1974 Pinchpenny book *The Tree with the Broken Rim*. For the sake of preserving Nick's distinct diction and syntax, honoring ancestral influence and setting the record as straight as one can, I cite it almost whole:

> In 1962, in the fall, I was working carpentering for a two-bit contracting outfit in New York City—a dollar fifty an hour, seven children with us. I was going to Columbia University to get some Russian and carry it home where it seems to me we have use for it. Hard times and hungry; full of scorn against us for being southern and Christian. Robert Frost came through on what turned out to be his last public speaking tour and put on a show at Sarah Lawrence College. My cousins were there—president and president's wife—and between their suggesting and Frost's OK, me and Dubose were invited. I'll always be grateful.
>
> The show was directed to my father, Vachel Lindsay, and at me, somewhere in the audience, though we hadn't met Frost yet that day. He was squinting against the huge lights the navy cameramen had set up to take their movies of this inexplicably national-security-interest person. (It was just before his trip to Russia.) . . . Frost spoke, was not to be stopped, reached past the machinery to the audience and his fellow students of the early part of this century—Sandburg, Lindsay—his presence erasing all that machinery and the intervening decades, bringing all seventy years into a present there with us. . . .
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> After the show people met together to confess and receive benediction or curse from the prophet, drink liquor—it's called discuss over cocktails—while Frost ate scrambled eggs. It's an

33. "Carpenter-poet Lindsay finds home in GC English department," *Goshen College Record,* Dec. 12, 1969.

34. Nick Lindsay, *The Tree with the Broken Rim* (Goshen, Ind.: Pinchpenny Press, 1975), 13.

expensive gothic house, the president's residence. Ten thirty at night.

He's through with his eggs. He moves into the room. The people swirl around, dry leaves, electrical fear of the power of this aged elephant, his animal largeness, his fame, his terrible and justified ego. College presidents, ex-presidents, reporters, public relations men, deans and one thing and another twirl glasses, chat, chat, chat. I speak to him, meet him then finally. We shake hands.

"You're old. But you're strong.

(Chuckles) "I'm tough!"

" A lightwood knot."

"I'm tough." (Anything worth saying is worth repeating.)

"When you spoke at the inauguration (Kennedy's) you said, 'This is a victory for the cause I represent.' What cause is that?"

"GOD." A huge voice. The chat chat in the room stops, the word jarring everyone, people mopping up spilled drinks. You take a big rock and drop it in a puddle and for a second you can see the bottom before the muddy wash comes back to cover all.

"That word of God, it's dangerous, ain't He? How? Risky. An acid to eat, fire to burn up all that's precious to a man." (Old Frost man, you and I both know how our families have lost sisters, daughters, sons, beloved, and the risks of art, yes close to the root of loss. I've got seven children in the house right now, can't spare a one.)

"Risk? Danger? You'll have to get that idea out of your head." (The jackass thing? You're old, you're tough, but you're dumb. Who doesn't know the risk of God's word knows a different God than I do. . . . But wait, he's going on.) "There's no danger to it. It's just a matter of life and death, that's all." He didn't last the year, had made his plans, spoke those nourishing, victorious words. He meant the same thing by the words *life* and *death* that most people do.

Frost says, "What are you doing in New York? I thought you were carpentering on an island down south. What's wrong with carpentering?"

"I'm here working toward a degree in Russian. We have some use for Russian back home."

"See here.

Don't

Join

The Certified."

Well but all those presidents and professors and academic counselors and one thing and another around there and it was a dean said, "O yes, do it, get a degree, get the p, the h, the d, get it all." And there was a chorus chimed in, "Do it, do it, do it."

Anything worth saying is worth repeating, "Don't

Join
The Certified.
Give 'em hell.
The bastards."[35]

In 1979, Brenda Hostetler Meyer, a senior elementary education major on the verge of graduation, worried over those words in her senior statement, printed in the *Record*, but she finally concluded, "Maybe I can raise a little hell in spite of my certification."[36] During the spring of 1977, Brenda had lived on Edisto Island with Nick and DuBose while working at a local public school. Now a Mennonite minister, she associates Nick with her love of preaching and language, and she sees his influence in her determination to never use religious language that she doesn't find personally meaningful. "Nick's spirituality is the kind that grows out of truth," she said, "not pious words."[37]

Before Brenda's marriage to Rich Meyer, he had also lived on Edisto, working on shrimp boats. He credits Nick with his failure to register for "Creative Expression"—a graduation requirement that had all Goshen students propose, display and demonstrate a definition of creativity, which sometimes got fulfilled with trivial activities, such as baking a cake or painting a Pinto. Rich left college without a diploma in 1978 and took up minimum wage jobs to learn skills—first in plumbing and then in auto mechanics.

After their marriage in 1981, the couple served for six years with Mennonite Central Committee in a remote rural village in Lesotho, where they encountered the idea of appropriate technology in the work of E. F. Schumacher. Those ideas met powerful application when the couple returned to Elkhart County, Indiana, with three children, and bought a failed forty-acre farm near Millersburg. Living in a trailer for six years, they built a barn first, then a fine house that runs on electricity entirely generated by wind and sun. Gathering knowledge and some unused equipment from local retired farmers, they developed the property into a farm for chickens and organic produce. Both Brenda and Rich associate Nick with self-sufficiency, nonspecialization, and practical

35. Ibid., 11-13.

36. "Certification validity, usefulness questioned," *Goshen College Record*, April 6, 1979.

37. Brenda Meyer, interview by author, May 25, 2006.

skills, values that must have sustained their own farmer ancestors, but that have gotten lost in more immediate, upwardly mobile memory.

"I had to think of Nick the first time I sanded a recorder to change the tone," Rich said. "There's nothing he wouldn't do. If he wanted a trench, he would rent a backhoe and dig a trench." This spirit—what Rich calls "the desacralizing of things held only for experts"—is evident in Rich's work in the Middle East with Christian Peacemaker Teams, an organization that takes laypeople to tense situations typically reserved for diplomats, soldiers, or other officially-sanctioned figures. Likewise, Brenda started her work as a minister without formal academic training. After years of work in bilingual education, she began serving as the pastor of a rural church in 1999, and only then did she begin part-time study at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries.

Naturally, it is difficult for a faculty member to eschew academic credentials and institutions and please his bosses. More than many places during the early 1970s, Goshen College may have been able to tolerate a critical shaman ranting within its gates, given the school's genuine desire to make higher learning meaningful and serviceable. Yet when Ervin Beck, hired as a permanent member of the English Department, returned from Indiana University in 1972, poised to defend his dissertation, Nick's full-time teaching schedule was cut in half. The English Department could not afford to support two very different but fine full-timers—Nick and Sara K. Hartzler—and because they wanted to keep both, both were reduced to half-time. The following year, Nick published the chapbook, *Words and the School*, which included the concrete poem, "Academic Encouragement"[38] (Fig. 2). In this poem, "Stop" composed of many tiny "gos," makes a brutal revision of his earlier "YES."

Fig. 2

38. Nick Lindsay, *Words and the School* (Goshen, Ind.: Pinchpenny Press, 1973), 11-12.

Later, with characteristic aplomb, Nick reflected on his reduction to part-time status, "We decided it was better. If you can't help it, you might as well boast about it!"[39] For a few years, he combined half-time teaching with carpentry work in Goshen. But carpentry was the family's mainstay, and that work was better done from their homestead on Edisto Island. So in 1976, the Lindsays returned. A *Record* article quoted the poet as saying that he would be taking a leave of absence "'to get a breath of fresh air' before continuing his 'missionary effort' on campus." Nick added, "Goshen College was unusual when I first came. Now it's trying hard to be ordinary, a little Harvard. I can only hold my breath so long."[40] Following his departure, at least four Goshen students lived and studied with the Lindsays on Edisto Island for extended periods of time.

Nick's poet-in-residence workshops continued in a three-week May term during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Of that period, community college administrator Dennis Huffman writes, "In a sense, Nick's arrival at Goshen each May was akin to a sort of pagan rite carried out to bring things back into (ahem) proper balance the rest of the year."[41] Sometime later, the visits were reduced to a week-long January workshop, which concluded in 2000. Poet and Spanish interpreter Carmen Horst, who grew up in a missionary family in Argentina, wrote of that latter period:

> Most of the time, I had no idea what Nick was saying. Distilled, I see him standing in a wasteland of intellect and middle class convention, shaking a fist and hollering absurdly, fiercely, like Seuss's Lorax: I am Nick Lindsay. I speak for the heart! To grow up in Latin America, even in a Mennonite family, means to learn at the very least a mild respect for the heart. Nick was a kind of homecoming.[42]

WHAT IS THE OPPOSITE OF A WOMAN? THE OPPOSITE OF WOMAN IS EVER AFTER

By analogy, the final pair extends and deepens the meaning of the earlier contraries and sets the foundation for Nick's aesthetic and spiritual vision. The meaning of "woman" is not merely the female human but also the Indo-European goddess Vach (*vox*, voice, vocalization). "In the beginning She—creator word—was with God." This woman represents fertility and birth, as well as the creative life force associated with art, *kairos* (i.e., being in the present moment), song

39. Lindsay, interview by author, Dec. 17, 2006.
40. "Lindsay gets some fresh air,"*Goshen College Record*, Feb. 6, 1976.
41. Dennis Huffman, in an e-mail message to author, Sept. 17, 2006.
42. Carmen Horst, in an e-mail message to author, Oct. 3, 2006.

and dance. By contrast, "Ever After" refers to the Brahmins, the literate conquerors who turned dancers into slaves.[43] "Ever After" or eternity belongs to the logocentric world of traditional religions. It is all that gets lost and gained when experience is consigned to the printed page: death and permanent records as opposed to oral tradition and the lifeworld, the values and forms of social control that literacy enables in a world governed by *chronos* or clock time. Although Nick professes primary shamanistic devotion to Her realm, his transcription of oral histories on Edisto, and indeed his work as a reader and writer, locate him in both spheres.[44]

This set of contraries is central to what Nick taught in those workshops that were so powerful, both for those of us who became poets and for those who did not. Wrote Dennis Huffman, "It was so incredibly liberating to be granted license to roam to the outer reaches of the pairs Nick presented us with: Sun and moon, earth and sky, light and darkness, male and female (!), barren and fertile, monotheistic and pantheistic, tick-tock time and time outside of time."[45] Nick showed students a way to view oppositions in play, as an alternative to the moralistic black and white morality of their childhoods, and he also presented a cosmology, huge and universal, in which we could begin to negotiate the tensions between our own creative impulses or curiosities and the particularities of our community's values and history. Nick showed us that poets are connected to the stories and songs of all people, of all time, and to the great force of life itself. For him, the practice of poetry is a dark and radiant art, close kin to song, indebted to Aphrodite and exacting in its ethical demands. Poets are morally bound to "defend the earth, bring hope to the oppressed, terrify tyrants. . . . We must stand with one foot in each of two worlds: the world of darkness where is the true radiance, and the common world of clocks."[46]

Nick's dualisms are aligned with the belief that opposed hemispheres of the brain govern different thought processes and activities, and his pedagogy embraced the knowledge attributed to both left and right brain. "His classes created a kind of 'space outside of time,'" recalled Indiana poet Shari Miller Wagner:

> a workshop in which there was the necessary analysis of poems, but the left brain function never superseded the open possibilities of the

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43. Paraphrased from Nick Lindsay, personal correspondence to author, July 2005.

44. Nick Lindsay published two volumes of oral history from Edisto Island with Pinchpenny Press. That work became the basis of a book that also features the photography of Julia Cart, *And I'm Glad: An Oral History of Edisto Island* (Charleston, S.C.: Arcadia, 2000).

45. Dennis Huffman, in an e-mail message to author, Sept. 17, 2006.

46. Lindsay, "The Lindsay War Cry," in *Magnificent Storm*, 147.

> moment that might lead to a story or a song, some spontaneous reminder that our words touched other words and ideas. Unlike most other poetry teachers I've had, Nick did not confine his comments to stylistic matters. He concerned himself with the vision of a poem and whether it was ethical and life affirming.[47]

As a first-year student in the summer of 1977, Wagner sensed in Nick's class "the feeling of somehow coming home," because it confirmed a sense that she had gathered, from reading Grimm's fairy tales and Greek and Norse myths, "that 'truth' is embedded in story and image and that divine grace is universal, in the grain of every great story." She recalled:

> Nick, of course, embraced the natural world, even the weeds, and found it all holy. During one class, he said something like, "If there are any fairy-folk in Indiana, you'll find them in the cornfields." That comment meant a lot to me because it affirmed the possibility of magic in a landscape that is so often described as mundane.[48]

In the early 1980s when I studied with him, students read canonical works and learned to write in traditional oral and written forms, as well as in free verse. But in addition to these standard elements of creative writing pedagogy, Nick introduced us to the mythology that informs much poetry and narrative. What sticks in my memory is Nick, head cocked to one side, hand raised, chanting. He introduced a new numeral and its meanings each class period, drawing on myths and archetypes from many times and cultures. Four, for instance, was the NEWS—north, east, west, south—and the goddesses associated with the four cardinal directions: North, the Tooth Mother (Kali), who drags a boat in a river of blood and whose healing is deadly antiseptic; West, the Stone Mother (Medusa), whose knowledge is book learning—"Look too long and you will turn to stone!"; South, the Madonna of Sweet Milk (Mary), nourishment, her color is grain's gold; and East, the Dancing Mother (Easter), protector of small animals, whose symbol is the egg and who is associated with the resurrection of our Lord and Savior, Jesus.

One might wonder whether there isn't something inescapably essentialist about these gendered Jungian types. (With all that devotion to Robert Graves's *White Goddess*, a female student might rightly ask who was to be *her* muse?) And yet, during the early 1970s, second-wave feminism was only beginning to stir in the wider world, and many Mennonite students came from churches where women still covered their heads to worship. If gender politics for young women of that era

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47. Shari Miller Wagner, in an e-mail message to author, Sept. 27, 2006.

48. Ibid.

amounted to striving to catch a fine husband, then Nick presented a powerful image of creativity that was bluntly feminine and faithful at once. For instance, he saw in the old hymn, "O Savior Rend the Heavens Wide," divine play and intercourse between the Warrior Sky God and Green Earth Goddess. He praised the female body and held sacred the labors of birthing and maternal nurture, speaking of his children's mother with a kind of reverence. He challenged conventional assumptions, claiming the body and sexuality—traditionally associated with women—as gifts, not matters for legalistic or moral control, and he praised the necessary but often hidden knowledge and work of women.

Holding opposites ever in tension, he also claimed the role of male hunter/provider and warrior, and neither denied the human potential for violence nor condemned it unconditionally as many Mennonites would. Poet David Waltner-Toews articulated the discomfort some felt with regard to Nick's frank portrayals of sex and violence:

> Nick dug deeply into himself and chanted it out; being true to himself, and to his cultural roots, meant that all the dark stuff came spilling out mixed with the light. I was never entirely comfortable with Nick's poetry, skirting as it did female idealization to the point where biology sometimes seemed confused with destiny, and viva-la-difference bravado carried the scent of verbal bullying, and perhaps misogyny. I didn't want my poetry to be a crude cabin next to alligator-infested swamps, which some of his poetry seemed to be. Maybe I was uncomfortable because I could not be that raw and honest, because I don't carry a gun, because I was afraid of the same beasts lurking in my own dark corners.[49]

Although he was deeply distressed by injustice and the war in Vietnam, Nick was not a pacifist. Much as he followed the Prince of Peace and stressed the importance of forgiveness, he also figured a God who is terrible, brutally violent and unpredictable. Colleague J. Daniel Hess's strongest memory of Nick pertains to a College Mennonite Church production of Benjamin Britten's opera about Noah and the Flood. Nick, cast as God, spoke from the balcony, and afterward, when the Sunday School class met to discuss the experience, Hess recalled, "Nick was overwhelmed, hardly able to talk, by having looked through God's eyes at the devastation, and wondering who God was."[50] When his son David was born, Nick placed a drawing on his office door that has been described as a "bellicose, aggressive announcement" of the arrival of another young warrior to the Lindsay clan.[51] Christian

49. David Waltner-Toews, in an e-mail message to author, Sept. 25, 2006.

50. J. Daniel Hess, in an e-mail message to author, Sept. 15, 2006.

51. John Fisher, interview by author, July 24, 2006.

Peacemaker Rich Meyer said, "I never saw Nick strike someone, but you got the feeling that there was that possibility." Nonetheless, Rich praised Nick's spirituality, "connected at the root, mind and body," adding, "you can't shut down some emotions without losing them all."[52]

Nick's frank honesty and acceptance of the broad range of human emotion and experience came as a surprise and relief to visual artist Elizabeth Wenger, who credits Nick with saving both her faith and her academic career. "Mr. Lindsay was one of very few telling the truth down there [at the college] in those days," she said.

> He knew who he was, and that made him the truth teller. Mennonites are too afraid to look at the shadow side, but not he. Mr. Lindsay was fearless. He was the only one willing to talk about the human condition. They used words like grace and peace, but Mr. Lindsay quoted Job, with real hostility.[53]

Liz had been out of high school for seven years, writing poems, when she finally showed them to Nick. She subsequently enrolled in classes at Goshen, until poor health made it impossible for her to continue. Now she creates drawings and tapestries that incorporate iconic visual images in much the same way she learned to use verbal images in Nick's classes. "The strongest gift he gave me in terms of learning was the loosening up of the Mennonite right and wrong," she said, recalling a time when the church felt "so ingrown, so overloaded with meaning. . . . I would have gone totally atheist if I hadn't learned from him that theology is one of the arts, in that it provides symbols for human experience."[54] Finding universal connections between religious and mythic systems came as a great comfort to Liz, who sees her commitment to Christianity—one among many possible paths—as parallel to Nick's commitment to DuBose. He once said that if he wanted to experience women, she recalled, and having only one life, he would have to find and be loyal to one woman. Concluded Liz, "I never could see God reaching down and giving this people the one and only truth. . . . It was nice to find I didn't have to reject everything else."[55]

Absolute rejections or affirmations, typical of young adults, were disturbed by Nick's inclusive and oppositional contraries. Carmen Horst recalled Nick, taking a page from Blake, shocking a class by saying, "Unbridled passion is the only road I know to the House of Forgiveness. (But I don't tell my Sunday school class.)"[56] In Nick's "Song of

52. Rich Meyer, interview by author, May 25, 2006.

53. Elizabeth Wenger, interview by author, May 25, 2006.

54. Ibid.

55. Ibid.

56. Carmen Horst, in an e-mail message to author, Oct. 3, 2006.

Opposites," grace might belong to the realm of "woman" as opposed to written law or Scripture, which endures "ever after." To the campus at large, Nick once said, "Don't ask 'How can I be more like Jesus?' Ask 'How can I be more like Myles Schrag?'" Wrote Carmen:

> I don't remember how Myles—the editor of *The Record*—came to be singled out—it was in chapel, not in class—but in any case, the gist of it was, "Don't try to be like anyone else—the real challenge is to be more like yourself!" Subsequently, the phrase, "How can I be more like Myles Schrag?" came to be mysteriously etched onto many, many orange cafeteria trays that circulated during the years I was a student at Goshen.[57]

The immediate and personal question, "How can I be more like myself?" challenges a community that values discipleship, sacrifice, yielding and self-denial—an ethos not especially supportive of the establishment of a strong, individual self.[58] And yet, those who become writers must negotiate between tradition, audience expectations and their own insights if they are to say anything useful or lasting. Nick provided for students an example of a charismatic voice that seemed true to its own vision, in word and deed. Poet and Bluffton College professor Jeff Gundy reflected:

> Beyond all that he taught me about poetry, and all the great poets and poems he gave us to read, what struck me most . . . was how fearlessly and seemingly un-self-consciously he was his own person. I don't know if it was really so or not—I doubt it, in retrospect—but it never seemed to even occur to him that he might dress differently or behave more like a typical professor. . . . At the same time, he wasn't "countercultural" in the usual '60s way, certainly not in the way I thought I was. He was devout in his own quirky way, he clearly loved DuBose and that cloud of children. . . . He defied categories. And he was alert for whatever he could find to praise in the fumbling exploratory poems we tried to write for him.[59]

57. The Myles Schrag episode is recounted in slightly different form in Kyle Schlabach, ed. *The Cow in Science Hall* (Goshen, Ind.: Pinchpenny Press, 1994), 39-40. In that account, the inscription on cafeteria trays is a statement, "I want to be more like Myles." The story and sense of its significance on campus are, however, consistent with Carmen's memory, as reported in an e-mail message to author, Oct. 3, 2006: "During a convocation, Nick, while speaking, said, 'How can I be more like me?' Then he said, remembering one of his workshop students, 'How can I be more like Myles Schrag?' This became a popular saying thereafter. People began writing it on their papers."

58. I am thankful for conversations with Ann Hostetler, about her teaching of a course in spiritual autobiography at Goshen College, that gave me language for and confirmed this point.

59. Jeff Gundy, in an e-mail message to author, Sept. 15, 2006.

Praise is also a strong memory for Carmen Horst, who recalled Nick often saying, "For this, much thanks"—expressing real gratitude for the writing and inner lives of students, which he treated with great delicacy and respect.[60] For all the times he protested and for all the reasons he raged, Nick's gratitude was greater. Woe to the one who invited him to give thanks before a meal, for his prayer might have begun with the chicken pecking in the yard that was so gruesomely slain, sung in graphic detail, continuing on and on to praise kitchen labor as the potatoes cooled on the table, expressing a gratitude almost boundless—and rightly so!

Don Yost, playwright and founder of Bridgework Theater in Goshen, recognized this praise and affirmation as essential aspects of Nick's approach to life and art. Nick and DuBose were powerful influences on Yost's personal and writing life during the late 1960s and early 1970s. He describes that time as:

> a dangerous mix of idealism and disappointment. We used our critical faculties to uncover the links between the war and commerce, war and religion. . . . At first, we believed that if we could convince a majority of Americans that the war was wrong, the war would stop. Finally 75% of Americans disapproved of the war, but the war continued.[61]

For Yost, disappointment turned to cynicism, and that, coupled with belief in a God incapable of violence, led to hopelessness. Don saw in Nick a man who had suffered great loss—as a father and a son—but who nonetheless affirmed life and thereby sustained his own creative work. Nick often alluded to the biblical text, "Yea, though you slay me, yet will I bless you and sing praises and dance in the ashes."

This kind of "radical affirmation," as Don terms it, was grounded in family and faith in a God who was unfamiliar to many at Goshen. "Nick and Dubose responded to and battled cynicism with an embrace of each other and of children. Their embrace of one another was a way of embracing the universe," Don writes. "Nick's god was much more difficult to be friends with, but as I grew to know this god, I learned that love is terrible, terrifying, powerful, and unpredictable. I learned to accept and even embrace tension. I learned that love is war and that war is caused by both love and hate." "Nick and DuBose," Yost concluded, "lived a radical affirmation—an affirmation that survives the death of loved ones, the ravages of hurricanes, and the failure of institutions."[62]

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60. Carmen Horst, in an e-mail message to author, Oct. 3, 2006.

61. Don Yost in an e-mail message to author, Sept. 19, 2006.

62. Ibid.

LAST WORDS

Have these reflections become hagiography? In seeking an answer to the question of Nick's influence on the current generation of Mennonite writers, have I found only what I'd hoped to find in the first place? What of the other smart, hardworking, noncharismatic teachers who got credentials, conformed to institutional roles and never generated legends? (Someone in Goshen told me they had to remove a whole wall to get Nick's ship out of the Ninth Street house!) Among the many who may have found him strange, there were always a few—strangers in their own families or communities, perhaps—who finally found in Nick's classes a powerful home. Carl Haarer, the Boston radio reporter who may be Nick's clearest aesthetic heir, wrote:

> i remember nick lindsay the ship. i rode that bizarre, rugged ship over many wonderful seas, seas that flashed with a bright literacy, seas that circled the loud island of his father. . . . even though i don't even remember him as a person . . . i remember nick lindsay, the ship, the vessel that carried me from me to god.[63]

I admit that I was among those who found Nick strange back then, though I longed for the time he would write "YES" in the margin of a poem, a practice I continue with my own students. Only lately have I seen how deeply his influence runs in my work and worldview—so deeply it must be imperceptible on the surface. His workshop, combined with my first course in women's studies, was so powerful that, when I returned to the Mennonite congregation in Scottdale the summer after my freshman year at Goshen, I shared my new ideas with our pastor. For some reason, unimaginable to me now, he invited me to preach a Sunday morning sermon. So I preached Nick's gospel of the Time of Earth Mothers and the Time of a Warrior Father in the Sky, and of our Savior who contains all contradictions and redeems us by rending the heavens wide. That story, I believed, could save faith's unfortunate, patriarchal mistakes. Many years later, the tension between oral and literate cultures became my means for understanding the life of Joseph W. Yoder, a contradictory and charismatic Amish-Mennonite writer and performer from the last century, subject of my dissertation and later biography. Further, unbeknownst to me at the time of its conception, Nick's prime contrary—"woman" and "ever after"—is *The Body and the Book*, the title and framing concept of my collection of essays that grapples with ideas about writing, gender, and religious and cultural identity.

One source who wished to be unnamed suggested that, while Nick may have made some poets at Goshen, Goshen also made a poet out of

63. Carl Haarer, in an e-mail message to author, Sept. 14, 2006.

Nick, by providing a place to publish and teach for a time, a place where he could be an author who built houses and boats, instead of a carpenter who wrote. That may be so, but Nick likely would have been himself wherever he lived, with or without institutional credentials to name and sustain him. As I reach the end of this essay, instead of offering conclusive answers regarding Nick's influence, my only wish is to offer praise and thanksgiving for his work and example, to finally somehow return Nick's YES.