Sarah's Seasons

AN AMISH DIARY AND CONVERSATION

Martha Moore Davis

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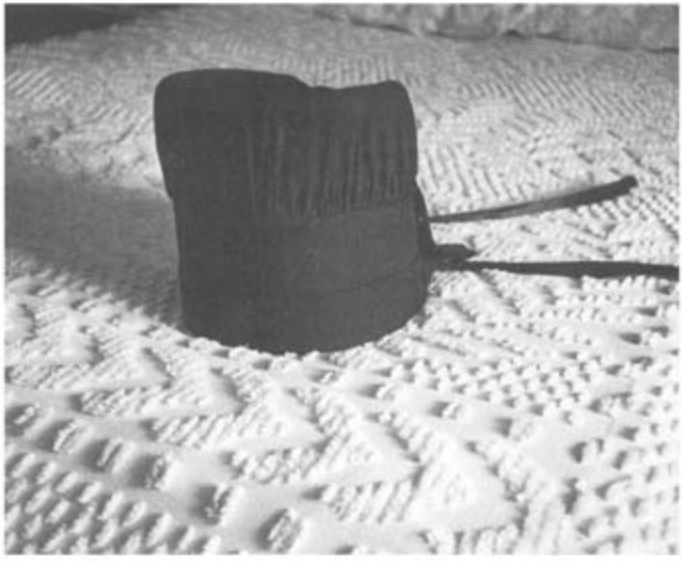

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An Amish Diary & Conversation

By Martha Moore Davis

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FOR STEVE AND STEPHEN

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Foreword

This is an appreciative foreword written from across the distances. They are the distances that still exist between rural village life and urban life, perhaps particularly life in a city like New York. They are the distances that exist between a secular existential thinker and a religious woman who writes within the fabric of a tradition, who lives in interlocking circles protected from the anguish of free choice. For all that, the voice of the living woman Sarah is made audible here. She is, even though she does not choose to advertise it, a creative person; and this frees her, although she may not know it, from the confines of doctrine and communally required compliance with predetermined rules.

She is Amish. The very word summons up, for many, the images of archaism, images of separation. And yet, because we associate the Amish culture with a peace and simplicity we realize we have lost, there is a pull at least to imagine how it is with them and how it was. How *does* the past work in their present? How and why do they survive?

Martha Davis enables us to feel ourselves into aspects of that world by linking her own lived experiences and even her own diary to what she presents of the Amish Sarah, writing the concrete particularities of her life. Because Sarah's voice and, yes, Martha's voice are contrasted to the voices of the social and educational historians who have "explained" what are called the Old Order Amish, we are struck by the peculiar mode of understanding made possible by diaries and letters. In this case, because the way

of living, thinking, and communicating seems so remote from the contemporary, the reader cannot but be fascinated by the unfamiliar aspects, even as the same reader may be recognizing aspects of her or his familiar life.

At a moment of incoherence in our society and a prevailing sense of eroded communities, there is something stirring and, at once, suggestive in reading about an enduring community that looks (at least on the surface) like the paradigmatic New England community. The very ideas of the circles that are created by letter writing, the multiplicity of them, the striving toward consonance and understanding among participants—all these offer new perspectives on what communities may mean and how they might be created and sustained. The woman's vantage point cannot be undervalued here. The fact that Sarah, as a woman, is declaring herself as something other than the abstraction emerging from social science description connects her to the women's narratives that are appearing on all sides. She is refusing labeling here, Amish or not, rural or not. By the end, a reader finds herself crossing the distances. She cannot identify or (in some cases) even justify. But the world is wider for the experience and new human possibilities are disclosed.

Maxine Greene, Teachers College, Columbia University

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Finally, I thank Steve and Stephen for encouraging me and for building our own cache of stories.

Sarah's Seasons

1 Coming to Know Sarah

I only light the lamps if really necessary and not until dusk. The windows in each room help a lot.
Sarah Fisher

I agonized over asking her. What if my question sounded too personal? Would I insult her? I knew the Old Order Amish valued their privacy away from mainstream life. At the same time, I felt an unspoken camaraderie with this Amish woman I had talked with only one other time.

I had met Sarah Fisher on a visit to Fellowship School about four months earlier. I was conducting postdoctoral research on Amish schools, and we had visited briefly. Now we were together again, enjoying an after-service Sunday dinner with nearly fifty other people at the home of David and Bertha Overholt.

"Have you ever kept a diary?" I blurted.

"Yes, several. Would you like to read them? Here, have some bread and pass it on," Sarah said.

The noon dinner continued, and so did our conversation. "Right now I'm not keeping a diary because I'm very busy with the baking business, but I'll show you the one I kept when I was first married. I just need some time to find it in my attic."

I learned later that Sarah, who I had thought to be about my age, was ten years older than I. She had written daily entries on a feed calendar for 1976 and 1977, each entry about five to six lines in length. At the time she began keeping the diary in January 1976, she had been married for two years, was thirty-four years old, had a daughter, Katie, two months old, and lived with her husband, Eli, on their farm. Sarah grew up on a farm in the Amish community near Kalona, Iowa. As is typical of Amish children, she attended Amish schools, and her formal education was completed through the eighth grade. She moved to Ohio to teach when she was twenty-one, taught for nine years, and then returned and married Eli at age thirty-two, relatively later than most Amish women, who usually marry in their twenties.

Although I was curious about Sarah's diary, what was foremost on my mind was why she trusted me to take it home with me to read. I was a mainstream outsider—an English person, as the

Amish say. Did she feel the unspoken bond between us that I did? And what about my own diary? Would she ever want to see it?

I went home to my two old trunks filled with keepsakes to search for the five-year diary I had kept as a child and a travel diary I had kept as an adult. I hadn't looked at them in years. Why had I written them, and why did I still have them? And why had Sarah written and stored her diary? I found the idea of reading her diary gripping. Would I find relief from the overwhelming life I seemed to be leading?

Perhaps I felt compelled to reevaluate how I was going about daily living because of several events that occurred all at once. First I heard that an artist I admired had died of AIDS. Then an old friend told me he was HIV positive. Public service announcements about this disease were suddenly personal, not distanced educational campaigns. Finally I learned that the country church near Iowa City I had attended during my first eighteen years was closing. St. Bridget's Catholic Church, 105 years old, the anchor I thought would always be there, was no more.

But Sarah's rural community, older than St. Bridget's, was and is a vibrant one in which families combine efforts to pay hospital bills, to build new barns, and to serve food to hundreds of relatives at funerals. Sarah goes about living with assurance and peace, always knowing how to comfort others in the midst of hardships. Like Sarah, I had enjoyed a ready-made rural community during my farm upbringing in the fifties and sixties. My farm neighborhood included many friends and relatives living close to us, some less than a mile away. Sarah grew up learning to stitch a quilt at the quilting circles; I learned to sew at St. Bridget's Altar and Rosary Society meetings, where we made placemats for retirement homes. My relatives visited one another often. But how different the nineties are for me now, with my friends and relatives living all over the world. Naturally occurring conversations are fewer and fewer. Instead of talking with neighbors about the best

grass seed to use, we hire lawn services that mechanically complete the tasks and move on to the next job.

It takes deliberate action to build shared experiences and communities. Sarah, her four girls, three boys, and husband Eli tell stories around the supper table about their work on the farm and in school. They talk over what they have learned from neighbors while attending a Sunday-night singing, and they listen to a visiting grandfather describe the first team of horses he worked. What stories will my son, Stephen, tell in twenty years? Are my husband Steve and I providing a community for him in today's world?

I cannot relate in a clever, twenty-second sound bite what Sarah has taught me about how to live within a community that places priority on people. When Sarah and I discuss such things, it usually takes two hours. That is how long it takes to pick the six rows of green beans in her garden. When we visit, talk and work go together. In this ongoing journey with Sarah, I become a member of a community in which I begin as an outside researcher and then find friendship. Through Sarah, I learn ways of living that dramatically change the way I live in the mainstream.

Our First Encounter

Sarah Fisher and I met in 1992 on an Amish school visitor's bench. I knew that the Amish welcome all visitors to their schools, but I hoped for more than just one or two visits. As a recent graduate of Teachers College, Columbia University in New York, I had accepted a college teaching position and begun work on postdoctoral research titled "The Old Order Amish in Iowa: Their Communities and Literacies." I planned to contrast the Old Order Amish schools near Kalona, Iowa, with mainstream schools to understand the ways communities support learning.

I knew I had to gain access in a courteous and proper way to build the necessary trust and a long-lasting relationship. A friend

of mine introduced me to his aunt, Anna Swartz, a retired farm woman living in the Kalona area. Anna's family had been Old Order Amish until she was three, when her family became Mennonite and chose a less conservative lifestyle. Though she grew up with motorized vehicles, telephones, and electricity (all modern conveniences not used by the Old Order Amish), she maintains close relationships with her Amish relatives. Anna arranged visits to several Amish schools, and together, we launched my study.

One early fall morning I drove from my home in Des Moines to the Kalona area to pick up Anna. We then drove to the one-room Fellowship School. Entering the room quietly, we found a woman already on the visitor's bench. I assumed it was the mother of one or more of the pupils, or scholars, as the Amish children are called. She signed the visitor's book and handed it to me. She had written her name and a comment: "Sarah Fisher. It's a bright, sunny day." Several people had been there that month. I skimmed over the entries, and then followed suit. After signing my name, I wrote "We are enjoying our visit," and I passed the book on to Anna. At recess time we filed outside with the scholars. As the children played tag, the adults visited.

With recess over, Sarah said, "I have to walk home now. I have gardening to start and bread rising at home, and I need to bake it. During the summer months I bake for the Farmers' Market, but now, during fall and winter, we sell our goods at the weekly auction."

"What do you bake? Where is the auction? How much do you bake?" I asked. I found out that the Fishers have a year-round baking business. Did Sarah operate it? Could an Amish woman have her own business? There were so many more questions I wanted to ask. Suddenly the activities and routine of Fellowship School seemed unimportant. I offered to give Sarah a ride home, and she accepted. (Anna later explained that it is common for the Amish to accept an occasional ride and also to hire drivers for long-distance