

## John F. Funk Monologue

By Veronica Weirich Berkey

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*NOTES: Stage set is simple or could be nothing at all. If you prefer, a table and chair resembling a work desk, or a rocking chair to indicate a home setting would be appropriate. John F. Funk would have worn plain clothes, which can be approximated with black pants, a white shirt, suspenders and plain black tie (especially the kind that tied in a bow shape at the collar, or simply by wearing all black. The words are more important than the costume. I'm providing very little stage direction, so that the reader can interpret as they like.*

*Stands looking in the distance, as though through a window or lost in thought.*

*Looks around – as if seeing the place for the first time.*

Yes, yes, I see you here. Though the place has changed, hasn't it? It was a little different in my day. My, my – you dress differently, my plain coat would seem so very out of place now, and my beard, well it isn't the hipster type. And the words – I thought learning English the first time was difficult.

My name is John F. Funk. Perhaps you've never heard of me. The F. stands for Fretz. They called me that when I was young – did you know? But my sister, she encouraged me to go by John. She said that Fretz could be confused for Fritz. (*chuckle*) She didn't want a Fritz for a brother. I guess I was never a Fritz.

But some things are not so very different, are they? (*gentle pause – and movement to a desk or a chair*)

I see you there – the ones that rejoice to come and to worship together and be a part of this community of faith and fellow believers. Your voices (the good and the not-so-good) rise in song, in harmonies that began when I was a preacher in Elkhart, Indiana. It was my friend Daniel Brenneman that told me once that he couldn't understand why God should give him a strong bass voice, and the lift of the spirit in hearing voices sing if we weren't to use them.

But let me tell you a little bit of my story, first. I was born in Bucks County, Pennsylvania in 1835, and grew up in a Mennonite family, attending the Line Lexington Old Mennonite congregation. But though it was a traditional, old Mennonite community, I thirsted for learning. The written words became friends and teachers. I was among the first to attend an academy for teachers – Freeland Seminary. I attended a Sunday School run by a local Baptist organization, and even taught there for a time. I worshiped with other congregations – Dunkard, Episcopal, Reformed and Congregational. I taught for three years after receiving my credentials, and then another sister called me away.

You see, her husband asked me to come to Chicago to work with him in a lumber business. This was successful – so successful that I began my own lumber business and was well on my way to becoming a millionaire. During that time, I relished the opportunities that this big city gave me. I attended lectures on topics from temperance to phrenology, the study of how brain size and shape effects an individual. I

joined a debate society and worked for the abolitionist movement.<sup>1</sup> Being in the city had its benefits, and the words were plentiful. I saw the church struggling with the response to the war between the states, and I feared I was seeing a movement away from Menno Simons' teachings on non-resistance. It was during this time that I wrote and published my first booklet – Christianity and War.

Words again – for many years I felt the call to teach and connect the Amish and Mennonites as they migrated and moved across the land. Printed words had the power to do this. I purchased a small printing press and began producing two periodicals – The Herald of Truth and Herold der Wahrheit [pronounced “Hair-old der Varheight”] in 1864, soon after I married my wife Salome.

You see, I was watching the Mennonite church around me dying. Around the Mennonites, other denominations had experienced a sort of Great Awakening. Missionaries, Sunday Schools and evangelistic meetings grew – and they spread their message to the people around them. Christian colleges and seminaries began to open and enroll more students who would then teach and preach.

But Mennonites resisted. Tradition, separation and humility were so central to our faith, that it was hard to understand how these “worldly” things could be anything but bad. It felt that we the church labeled things that we did not understand, or did not like as worldly, and therefore unacceptable to God. I began to wonder that these - new things, these changes - could be a way to a greater faithfulness, to living in the spirit of the gospel. In some ways we were trapped by our separatist ways, unable to live out and share the pure and simple Gospel message in the ways of Menno Simons.

I felt strongly that the words of the great teachers should be spread to all of our brothers and sisters, in the languages of our first home and our new home. It's funny – now – but there was a time when my sisters and brothers thought that God spoke only in German. I remember telling Salome one night that I loved the souls of those who do not understand German more than I love the language. Words, again – words in both languages (in all languages) speak the truth of the gospel.

Both of those first publications were a success. At the end of the first year, there were about 1000 subscribers.

In time, I moved my family and my printing operations to Elkhart, Indiana, where I had connected strongly to the Mennonite congregations in Goshen, Topeka, LaGrange, and the railroads in Elkhart gave me the means to print more materials for the Mennonite Church. We printed copies of the *Martyr's Mirror* to replace those destroyed by war. We printed the complete works of Menno Simons. Though I was ordained to preach, that simple press became my most important pulpit.

*(again, pause and movement)*

I see you there – the brothers and sisters mired in conflict and sometimes too tired or angry to drag yourself back to this place. I know conflict. I watched it change people and change the church. People are people wherever you are, and some could not or would not consider change. My brother Jacob Wisler was one of these. It wasn't long after we came to Elkhart that he censured my friend Daniel for attending evangelistic meetings, and then preaching in much the same way here at home. There were hostile words, and there were many tears and many hours spent on my knees. In the end, a council of

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<sup>1</sup> In Pursuit of Faithfulness, by Rick Preheim, 2016, p. 54.

sixteen ministers from four states and Canada were brought in to render a solution, and it still did not bring peace. *(sadly, tiredly)*

This particular conflict led us to an eventual parting. Jacob and one hundred others went away from the community to worship in their own way. I do not have the answers, only the advantage of hindsight. I can tell you that the departure of my brother Jacob opened doors, and in the spirit of the gospel we went on to do many good things in the Lord's name. Please hear me, I always believed the progress simply for the sake of progress was not in the best interest of the church. Rather, finding the way between rigid tradition and unfettered new-ness is the way to find new ways to strengthen our core beliefs, not to undermine them.<sup>2</sup>

*(pause and small movement)*

This was not the only moment that we disagreed. The conference rules and teachings were opposed to Sunday School.<sup>3</sup> They thought that Sunday Schools were a way in which the young, especially, were going to be led away from the church – into the world. But they didn't understand what I had experienced. Learning had opened my heart to the very core of our faith, to the gospel message.

It took twenty years for the church to begin to accept the idea of teaching the congregation in this way. It was hard because the teaching materials that were available were non-denominational or of other denominations, and were often nationalistic and did not promote non-resistance, something that could not be overlooked. I began to put together little books, one for primary classes, one for intermediate classes, one for adult Bible class. These Mennonite teaching materials paved the way to words that reached our members at all ages and places. I suppose that our rather urban location compared to the rural locations of my childhood and my brothers and sisters gave us some freedom to try things that otherwise might not have been acceptable.

You must see-- things don't just change. They change because there's a reason. We must not change just for the sake of change, but we must not resist change, just for the sake of resistance. Let's not be for what was, let us be for what is good and faithful to our God.<sup>4</sup>

The words that flew from the printing presses that we put to work in Elkhart reached so much farther than I could have imagined. After a time, Mennonites in Russia were reading these words of the new world, and experiencing persecution in their place, began to travel to us. Many of them came through our spaces in Elkhart, and I would assist them in finding temporary lodging and supplies until they could move on to more permanent homes.

The ones I remember most clearly arrived mere hours after my eight-week-old daughter, Alice, died in my arms from a fever. It was deeply moving to work with these immigrants to fill my empty arms with food and with blankets to allow them rest and hope in our church home very near to ours.

My business skills and organizational leadership were used often in the church. I lived to see many of the people I brought to Elkhart to work for the publishing company go on to do great things for the Lord.

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<sup>2</sup> In Pursuit of Faithfulness, p. \_\_\_.

<sup>3</sup> An Address by John F. Funk on the occasion of the Ninety-Second Anniversary of His Birth at the Mennonite Church, Elkhart, Ind. April 6, 1927, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Adapted words from Joel Kauffmann's monologue, Grossdaddy, written for Bethlehem, 1983.

I was there for the first baby steps of a mission organization, as I heard God's call to see and hear the words of the oppressed and to reach out to them in love and healing. I see that there are still the oppressed and the silenced, now, as well. I ask you to see them, and to reach out to them with more than words, offering hope and healing.

I cannot see the future, any more than anyone else. The past should inform us, should be honored for what it was in that time. The present should be acknowledged - see what the vision and creativity of others has brought to us! We have more than we have ever had to further the work of the kingdom! Money. Technology. People! The future should be prepared for, may we continue to circle the globe with the light of Jesus Christ.

These are my own words from an address on the occasion of my 92<sup>nd</sup> birthday, and they hold true beyond my death to life on earth. *(pause and re-center)*

"And so I feel with these teachings and experiences that the Lord has been good unto me and I cannot refrain from expressing my trust and confidence in the Almighty Father, in the words of the poet, when he says:

Praise God, from whom all blessings flow; Praise Him all creatures here below; Praise Him above ye heavenly host; Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> An Address by John F. Funk, April 6, 1927, p. 13.

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## Resources

Bender, Harold S. "Funk, John Fretz (1835-1930)." *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. 1956. Web. 8 Oct 2019. [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Funk, John Fretz \(1835-1930\)&oldid=145207](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Funk,John_Fretz_(1835-1930)&oldid=145207).

Funk, John F. "An Address by John F. Funk on the Occasion of the Ninety-Second Anniversary of His Birth at the Mennonite Church Elkhart, Ind. April 6, 1927", printed pamphlet by unknown, reviewed at the Mennonite Historical Library.

Kauffman, Joel. *Grossdaddy*. A play created for Bethlehem conference 1983. Reviewed at the Mennonite Historical Library.

Preheim, Rick. *In Pursuit of Faithfulness: Conviction, Conflict and Compromise in Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference*. Herald Press: Harrisonburg, Virginia. 2016.

*Sent Magazine*, August 1983. Synopsis, additional information and photos of "Grossdaddy" by Joel Kauffman for Bethlehem, 1983.