



*The Life of
J. Heinrich
Arnold*

*“Powerful
inspiration!”
—Martin Sheen*

Homage *to a* Broken Man

PETER MOMMSEN

*A true story of faith, forgiveness,
sacrifice, and community*

FOREWORD BY EUGENE H. PETERSON

Peter Mommsen

Homage to a Broken Man

The Life of J. Heinrich Arnold

With a Foreword by Eugene H. Peterson



PLOUGH PUBLISHING HOUSE

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Published by Plough Publishing House
Walden, New York
Robertsbridge, England
Elsmore, Australia
www.plough.com

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Print ISBN: 978-0-87486-613-1
Epub ISBN: 978-0-87486-599-8
Mobi ISBN: 978-0-87486-644-5
Pdf ISBN: 978-0-87486-645-2

A preliminary version of this book appeared in 2004 in a limited edition. The present 2015 edition is extensively revised and expanded, and now includes an essay on sources, an index, and photographs.

The epigraph from Thornton Wilder is taken from his play *The Angel That Troubled the Waters* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1928). The quotation is abridged.

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To Christoph and Verena

Without your wounds where would you be?
The very angels themselves cannot persuade the wretched
and blundering children of earth as can one human being
broken in the wheels of living. In love's service,
only the wounded soldiers can serve.

Thornton Wilder

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Foreword

Eugene H. Peterson

AS A PASTOR, I HAVE SPENT most of my adult life looking for connections between the lives of those with whom I am living and the stories of the men and women I read about in the Bible. Just as the entire biblical revelation comes to us in the form of story, so today nothing less than great storytelling is adequate to render the intricacy of creation and redemption in our own lives.

Peter Mommsen's new biography of his grandfather, *Homage to a Broken Man*, tells a story worthy to take its place in the company of the "greatest story ever told," as an extension of that biblical story into the circumstances of our contemporary lives. Today too, as in the days of old, God calls out the most unlikely heroes, uses imperfect people for his glory, and remains faithful to his people no matter how far they stray.

As I read this book lines from Psalm 118 came to mind: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." Anticipating his imminent crucifixion, Jesus used these words to describe himself. It struck me as an apt text to describe the "broken man" of this story as well, a follower of Jesus who was also a "stone that the builders rejected." Though J. Heinrich Arnold never doubted his calling to serve Christ in a common life together with his brothers and sisters—he shepherded a fledgling movement of Christian communities through a cataclysmic chapter of history and its own turbulent

growing pains—he would never have chosen to lead. Humble by nature, mystical by bent, and a farmer by training, he was soon sidelined by more ambitious and manipulative men. We can be glad the story doesn't end there.

Another scripture this story will evoke, I must admit, is Jesus' counsel to his followers as he prepares them for what will most certainly come as they give witness to his new life of love and salvation: "One's foes will be members of one's own household" (Matt. 10:36). This book will give you a whole new appreciation for Bonhoeffer's well-worn phrase, "the cost of discipleship." It's hard to believe what Arnold put up with from those closest to him, but what emerges is an exceptional personal story of faithfulness and forgiveness, one that in turn rekindled the fires of first love in an entire church community.

One of the most soul-damaging effects of modern life is the obfuscation of story: the fragmentation of story into disconnected anecdotes, the reduction of story to gossip, the dismemberment of story into lists of formulae or rules. In most of the words that come before us each day—delivered via television, internet, newspaper, billboard, and gossip—there is rarely any story beyond the immediate event. There is very little that connects to the past, reaches into the future, or soars to the heights. Instead of connecting us with a deeper reality, such words disconnect us, leaving us in a boneyard of incident and comment.

On the other hand, every time someone tells a story and tells it well and truly, the gospel is served. Out of the chaos of incident and accident, story-making words bring light, coherence, meaning, and value. If there is a story, then maybe, just maybe, there is (must be!) a Storyteller.

Baron Friedrich von Hügel, the Austrian writer and theologian, was fond of saying, "There are no dittos among souls." At school I learned to marvel that no two snowflakes are alike, no two oak leaves identical. How much more unique is each human being! A true hearing of the gospel always takes in the specifically personal. "I have

called you by name” (Isa. 43:1) has become an essential element both in my personal life and pastoral vocation.

Meanwhile the culture in which we are immersed is constantly at work eroding the uniqueness of named persons by giving them labels: ectomorph, unsaved, anorexic, bipolar, single parent, diabetic, left-brained. The labels are marginally useful for understanding some aspect of the human condition, but the moment they are used to identify a person, they obscure the very thing I am most interested in: the unprecedented, unrepeatable soul addressed by God.

Every time someone is addressed by name and realizes that in the encounter they are being treated as one-of-a-kind—not as a customer, not as a patient, not as a voter, not as a sinner—the gospel is served. Saving love is always personally specific, never merely generic. Christ’s mercy is always customized to an individual, never swallowed up in an abstraction.

A good writer gives us eyes to see past the labels, ears to hear beneath stereotyping clichés. Peter Mommsen is such a writer. By the time you finish the book you will have made a new friend in J. Heinrich Arnold. In fact, this book introduces us to a whole cast of characters whose stories can heighten our own awareness and sensitivity to the life of Christ being lived in us. If nothing else, I hope that after reading *Homage to a Broken Man* you will never again doubt that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him” (Rom. 8:28).

Evil is not, as some think, the greatest mystery. The mysteries of goodness and redemption far exceed it, but they can be entered only when evil is faced. These mysteries become apparent when we find companions like those brought to life in the pages of this book, in communities like the Bruderhof, and in unassuming and patient leaders like J. Heinrich Arnold.

Author's Note

THIS BOOK IS THE TRUE STORY of one man's quest to follow his calling—a story of what Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls costly discipleship. It's not the tale of a saintly superhero: as the following pages make plain, my grandfather was no stranger to weakness or failure. Still, my aim has been to recount an exemplary life, one that I hope will mean as much to the reader as it means to me.

In telling this story, my approach has been to focus on decisive moments in my grandfather's spiritual journey. This means, by way of tradeoff, that I've sacrificed any attempt to be comprehensive, omitting dozens of people and episodes that might have earned a mention in a more conventional biography. It means, too, that I've given most attention to my grandfather's formative years, so that much of the text is essentially a series of portraits of the subject as a young man. (This book makes no claim to be a history of the Bruderhof, the Christian community in which he served as a pastor.)

My grandfather was never famous. During his life, his influence—profound as it was for those who knew him—spread no farther than a few thousand people. To write about such an ordinary, even obscure, person goes against the starting assumption of traditional biography, a genre that was invented (to use Petrarch's phrase) to record the doings of “illustrious men”: history's great statesmen, heroes, geniuses, villains, and saints. My grandfather doesn't fit the bill.

Why write his biography then, or read it? Because, I believe, his story is universal—it’s a story that matters. His courage, humility, and downright doggedness in following his calling, no matter the cost, speaks to an inborn yearning shared by millions. If this is true, the usual benchmarks that biographers apply to their subjects—success, prominence, impact—suddenly seem beside the point, their value relativized. As a certain rabbi said two thousand years ago, “The last shall be first, and the first shall be last.”

Quotations and dialogue are based on participants’ recollection or are reconstructed from written sources. In a handful of cases noted in the index, I’ve changed the names of people whose role in the story is minor.

Opa

THE MORNING MY GRANDFATHER DIED, I told everyone in my kindergarten class, “Today Opa went to heaven!” My teacher, a long-time friend of our family, started to cry, but her tears made no sense to me. Who wouldn’t be proud to have a grandfather in heaven?

Of course, I would miss him. Opa and Oma lived in an apartment in our house, and ever since Oma (my grandmother) had died two years before, he had been sick and rarely left it. My mother, the seventh of their nine children, is a doctor, and Opa had a buzzer by his bed for calling her at night. She spent at least an hour or two in his room every day, sitting at his bedside while I played on the floor. I loved bouncing on his bed and—when he let me—on him. There was a sort of trapeze suspended above his pillow that he used for pulling himself up. It was perfect for swinging on, and then letting go of, to land on his stomach.

On some afternoons my mother wouldn’t let me use the trapeze. “Let Opa rest,” she’d say, and then I’d have to content myself with just sitting next to him. It was probably on one of those days that I noticed the little black cross that hung on his wall. It fascinated me, though I didn’t know what I know now: that he had made it as a boy for Tata, an aunt who had been like a second mother to him.

Opa listened to Bach by the hour. Whenever I hear *Saint Matthew Passion* I’m transported back to the times I helped bring him his lunch.

He is sprinkling so much salt on the sliced tomatoes that they look frosted, despite my mother's protests. He grasps the teapot handle with fingers twisted by disease. Having poured the tea, he heaps a mound of saccharin tablets (he had diabetes) onto his spoon, and stirs.

When he told me he loved me, his words came out in a rich tenor, unhasty and heavily accented. I loved his room and its smell— asparagus, European cologne, burgundy. But what I loved most about it was something a child would never think to speak of, let alone explain. He simply drinks it in, eagerly and without question. Even as an adult, I cannot really articulate it, except to say this: whatever it was that drew me to his bedside was, for years, the most powerful thing in my life—a sure point to return to when everything else went wrong.

Twelve years after Opa died, I sat in the hall of the Harvard Freshman Union listening as President Neil Rudenstine prepared us for the rest of our lives. “You’re the best there is, the *crème de la crème*,” he told the 1,600 new freshmen, and I believed him with all my heart. For the next three years I kept on believing. A tumor of the soul was gradually taking over everything I thought and did. This was not Rudenstine’s fault: he was only doing his job. But my arrival at college coincided with the start of a new, aggressive phase of the disease.

I was funded by generous financial aid and became a moderately successful student. I worked at the literary magazine, drank a lot when I could, and proved my lack of talent at rugby and crew. On my twenty-first birthday I woke up on a futon, hung-over from champagne and sweaty in a crumpled tuxedo, feeling hollow and desperate. For years a sense of guilt had pursued me with a terrible constancy, and I had managed to evade it. No longer.

Just then, when everything seemed at its cheapest and falsest, I realized I had a choice to make. Either I could turn my back on any integrity I had left, or I could stop, turn around, and retrace my path until I got back to something I was sure of.

And so I backtracked to my great-grandmother, Opa's mother. She is only an image in my mind. I see her descending the staircase on her electric lift. She's coming down from her apartment to our breakfast, where she will sit by Opa's side, picking delicately at a boiled egg in a cup.

I see Oma, too. She is warm and energetic and resolute in the way she moves. She reads stories to us on the sofa, and never forgets to bring a gift on birthdays or at Christmas. She is also strict. Once, at breakfast, I disobeyed her. That is something Opa never tolerated, not from his children, and not from his grandchildren either. Opa said to my father, "Marcus, that boy needs a spank." (I was barely two, according to my mother's diary.) But even at that moment I wasn't afraid of him. With Opa you were always secure.

Not long after, Oma is diagnosed with cancer. She lies on a sofa in her living room where she can watch the neighborhood children as they walk to and from school. She dies shortly before my fourth birthday.

But most of all, I remember Opa. After Oma's death, my cousin Norann and I make him a Valentine out of shiny red paper. It is from Oma, we tell him when we bring it to his room. Opa beams at us as he takes it. He makes us sit on his bed, and tells us stories—about the monkey he kept as a pet when he lived in South America; about the time he had to drive a rich lady through a jungle in his horse wagon, and the horse died. He is a great storyteller, smiling infectiously, surrounded by gales of laughter.

Looking back, I realize that many of my cousins knew Opa far better than I. My mother says I would often refuse to show affection to him. He had a candy dish on the dresser by his bed. Sometimes I came down the hall to his room just for the candy, refusing even to say goodnight to him. My parents were embarrassed, but he just chuckled, "It's OK, it's a free country."

When I was six I caught my first fish, a twelve-inch bass. I can still feel the thrill as the red bobber went under. Someone cleaned it for

me, and (maybe because I hated fish) I suggested giving it to Opa. He ate all of it. It was just a month before he died.

During his last days my mother forbade jumping on the bed, and sometimes my cousins and I couldn't even go in the room. Then we would content ourselves with visiting him through the window. Standing in the garden, we'd peer through the pane and sing his favorite songs. Sometimes he lay quietly, trailing oxygen tubes, his eyes closed. At other times he'd gaze back at us, and smile or try to wave.

After Opa's death, I came to accept that he was gone, but I never forgot him. Everything I had experienced as a child lived on. As I turned into a teen, though, life became more complicated, and he grew more and more distant. I even began to chafe at his memory. Sure, I'd always love him, but just who was he? I knew what he had done for most of his life—he was a pastoral counselor, though he would have hated the term. I also knew he had been highly regarded for his sensitivity and humility. But that didn't explain the riddle of conflicting reactions to him. Why did the mere mention of his name seem to polarize people even after he was gone?

Most adults I knew, including my father's parents, loved Opa deeply and spoke of him almost reverently. They claimed he was the most significant person they'd ever met, that he had changed the whole course of their lives. Others felt differently. One estranged cluster of relatives was said to despise him and everything he stood for, even though they hadn't seen him in several decades. And then there was the story about an attempt on his life by a man he had counseled years before. The would-be sniper boasted that he had had Opa in his sights before changing his mind and deciding not to pull the trigger.

At Harvard, despite what I had claimed in my application essay, love of learning was not the point. The point was new power in a new world—a world where I could do as I liked.

There were good moments. Arguing about Coleridge and Virginia Woolf with a group of friends amid the smell of cardamom and hookah

