

# True to life

by [Trudy Bush](#) in the [October 18, 2003](#) issue

*Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx.* By Heidi B. Neumark. Beacon, 275 pp., \$25.00.

How does a pastor struggling to raise her children and serve a church in a neighborhood filled with gunshots and sirens and littered with drug paraphernalia find breathing space--space to pray, read and think? Heidi Neumark struggles with this question in reflecting on a 19-year pastorate at Transfiguration Lutheran Church in the South Bronx. She opened the doors of a dwindling Hispanic congregation to the area's African-Americans and, with difficulty, succeeded in integrating the two communities. She opened the church doors to children with nowhere to go after school, to struggling young mothers and to a myriad of programs aimed at improving people's lives.

Neumark's book is most remarkable for her portraits of parishioners, desperately poor people in whom she finds amazing resilience, kindness and capacity for change and renewal. A touching example is the walk-a-thon Neumark naïvely arranges to raise money for a new church building. Few of those who participate manage to get sponsors, since they don't know anyone who has enough money to make a pledge. But a crowd of parishioners--including an 85-year-old woman and people ravaged by AIDS, cancer and asthma--intrepidly make the five-mile walk. Neumark finds her breathing space in writing about her experiences in whatever odd moments her life affords. The result is a memorable, horizon-expanding book.

*Grace: A Memoir.* By Mary Cartledgehayes. Crown, 293 pp., \$23.00.

With verve and humor, Mary Cartledgehayes tells of growing up on a small island in Lake Erie, her early marriages and two divorces, and the dramatic conversion experience that brought her to the church and to a happy third marriage. The core of the book recounts Cartledgehayes's reluctant acceptance of a call to the ministry at age 42, her experience at a not-so-woman-friendly Duke Divinity School, and her life in a parish she loved, but which was less than accepting of a woman pastor and the changes she brought. (She left parish ministry after three years.)

As tragedy stalks both her parish and her family, she struggles with understanding and accepting the human condition and our relationship with God. She not only recounts her struggles with her sermons but includes a number of them. They are excellent--she won the preaching prize at Duke--but their presence sometimes interrupts the flow of the story. A funny and feisty woman who insists on retaining her personality and exercising her intellect, Cartedgehayes now serves as writer in residence at World Connections for Women in North Carolina.

*The Tiger Ladies: A Memoir of Kashmir.* By Sudha Koul. Bluestreak, 218 pp., \$15.00 paperback.

Koul had a seemingly Edenic childhood in India's Kashmir valley, a childhood marked by the warmth of a large extended family, a feeling of being deeply rooted in her surroundings, and an experience of remarkable religious tolerance. Muslims and Hindus lived together with neighborly affection, and their children were likely to attend Catholic schools. None thought of giving up his own religion, but people respected each other's beliefs. A Hindu child attentively learned about Christianity from the nuns, but remained a Hindu. Koul brings that world so vividly alive that even those who have never known it will feel homesick for it.

But that world didn't last. Fought over by India and Pakistan, infiltrated by the Afghani Mujahadeen, Kashmir became a place of terror and bloodshed. Most of its Hindus have fled to India or other countries. Koul has written her book to preserve a valuable and beloved way of life--a life she wants her American-born daughters to understand. Though her memories have perhaps idealized the Kashmir of 50 years ago, her longing for that place and time gives hope for rebuilding a world of connection and harmony.

*Touching the Edge.* By Margaret Wurtele. Wiley, 246 pp., \$24.95.

Raised an agnostic, Margaret Wurtele started practicing yoga at midlife. That led to daily meditation, and that led to membership at Minneapolis's St. Mark's Episcopal Church. Studying the spiritual classics, Wurtele was brought up short by St. John of the Cross's *Dark Night of the Soul*. She was plunged into her own dark night when her only child, 22-year-old Phil, was killed in a climbing accident. Wurtele's anguish makes parts of this book painful, but her honesty and wisdom compel one to keep reading. Her sorrow is complicated by her position as part of a blended family. Her son had been her special ally, and his death leaves her feeling lonely among her

husband and stepchildren. She struggles not only to survive her pain but to become more loving, giving, and close to God.

*Home Is Always the Place You Just Left: A Memoir of Restless Longing and Persistent Grace.* By Betty Smartt Carter. Paraclete, 209 pp., \$15.95 paperback.

Memoirs are often inspired by loss--of a beloved person, career, home or dream. They recount a process of change and growth, and come to some resolution. Betty Smartt Carter is only in her 30s, young to be writing a memoir, and the sense of loss with which she struggles hasn't yet been resolved. The child of a conservative evangelical preacher too busy working for God to have much time for his family, Carter recounts a lifelong struggle to fit her thoughts and behavior into the pattern of her parents' beliefs.

Carter is an extremely talented writer with a winning sense of humor. But the main note of this memoir is anguish. Her relentless effort to live a life at odds with her intellect and emotions is marked by shame, guilt and depression. She tries to see the path of suffering she is on as her way to God. And she tries to see her obsessive love for a series of women friends as a substitute for her heart's true longing for Jesus. The book ends with a moment when Carter truly wants no one but Jesus, but she recognizes that this moment is fleeting. For her, the dark night of the soul has become not an occasional part of the spiritual journey but the whole of it.