KIRBY MOSS

The lonely phone kept ringing

For about four months I called them, maybe twice a month. The phone rang, rang, rang. There's a bell on their house that allows them to hear the ring when they're outside. I can imagine the phone's toll searching for them over their meager four-acre farm.

Maybe they were in Colorado visiting their daughters. They're both retired, so a vacation was a real vacation for them. And, of course, they had no answering machine in that bucolic place. So, I'd catch them when I caught them.

I met her four years ago, the subject of an idea for a story when I was a reporter in Omaha. I wanted to write about what life was like for black residents of this state who lived outside of Omaha, Lincoln and a few of the other budding urban towns in Nebraska. Were there any black farm families in the state? If so, where and how had they managed?

I called every sparsely populated county in the state and found one couple. From the first time I heard her voice on the phone, something about it was soothing. We set up a time to drive out to their small town of 890 people in far-Western Nebraska and do the story.

She greeted me as I drove up. A tall woman: 5 feet 10 inches, 5 feet 11 inches. Broad shoulders, big hands. Her face was smooth like liquid chocolate.

They were the lone black family in town. For two days she told me her life story. Where they came from. Why they came. About how she and her husband raised their children in a cramped white house next to the railroad tracks in town and when they could afford it, they moved out to their farm.

She tended chores while we talked. A strong woman. In each hand, she lugged 10-gallon buckets of water and feed to her animals. She mixed concrete to rebuild the feeble foundation around their house. She split wood. And she wasn't afraid to clobber a 400-pound hog if it got too sassy.

I marvelled at her and her life. Before then, my closest encounter

with rural life came from watching TV. Even worse, growing up in Omaha, I never assumed black folk lived anywhere in Nebraska west of the city's instinctive class and color dividing line — 72nd Street.

But this couple was refreshing proof that they do and have. They were real-life black farmers, not city folk. Hence, their perspective on life was not squeezed within the narrow parameters of urban strife. Compared to me and so many other black folk in America's cities, they seemed free. Blissful with the secret that they possessed the simple meaning of what life should and could be.

I jotted down all this information for my story, checked out of my motel, and drove back to Omaha; all the time though knowing I'd see her again.

Two months later, I called them and asked if I could come back out. Not to do a story. Just to visit.

"Come right ahead," she said. "I'll even make you a farm-cooked, farm-raised dinner. Oh, and can you bring me some chitlins from Omaha. The stores out here don't sell them."

That next morning, I packed up my little Honda, chitlins and all, and set out on my five-hour drive. After dinner, the three of us sat around a wood burning stove in the living room talking about the virtues of country life vs. the vices of city life. Eventually the embers faded, and it was time for bed.

Natural silence and the blackness of night were remembered most before sleep. In the morning, we ate fresh eggs and bacon plucked from their own chickens and hogs.

I repeated that trip about five times since the first time I was there, my last trip being last March.

Last September, I planned another trip to see them. I called. No answer. Over semester break I was near their town and called again. No answer. They had to be in Denver, I thought.

Finally, two weeks ago I called and someone picked up their phone. It was her husband.

"Hi," I said, subtly relieved. "I've been trying to reach you for months."

As I suspected, they had been back and forth to Denver.

"When did you get back?"

A couple of days ago, he said. We talked briefly about the trip.

"Where's (your wife)?"

He hesitated.

"She passed away, Kirby. I lost her to cancer. She got sick one day all of a sudden. Had to take her to a hospital in Denver. She was there for about two months. She died in October on her 61st birthday."

I was silent for a moment. Eyes wet. My heart hollow. I called for her for months. I even wrote. She was so resilient and alive, I never assumed death.

In my silence — although it's futile to do so — I questioned her death, especially. Why her? Why now? At the same time, I pondered my existence.

She was life, to me, in its purest human form. So different than most of us. Warm, kind. Natural like the plot of land they farmed. Still, the empty reality is that death is cruelly indifferent and — depending how close it stalks near our own lives — has a stark way of reducing those of us left living. Reminding us that life is death.

Her husband's voice reached through the phone's muffled silence and said she asked about me when she was sick. Instantly, a helpless guilt rang in my mind like the lonely phone in their home I called so many times.

As the phone rang, I thought, she was dying and I never knew. I called and called, even as the town mourned at her funeral, all the time hoping she'd answer.

Moss is a graduate student in anthropology and a Daily Nebraskan columnist.

GARY YOUNG

Church grows silent with time

Noticeably absent from the discussion of the Lincoln chapter of the Boston Church of Christ, associated with Campus Advance, is the voice of the orthodox church community.

False churches are nothing new; they come and go like misguided televangelists.

Interesting in the cases of both televangelists and false churches is that the orthodox church is usually the last to comment, though ostensibly it has the most at stake.

In times past, the church took care to protect the public from false churches. Deformed religion can deform humans. Invoking church discipline, then, is more than just the authoritarian belligerence it is so often caricatured as; it is serious, high-stakes business. It is also thorny work. The church can undoubtedly get it wrong in some cases.

Ignoring the countless deaths at the hands of the modern state's demand for political allegiance, critics of the church have milked the so-called Dark Ages for all the anti-church propaganda they are worth. The textbook view of the medieval church is rarely more than a triumphalistic sneer at the church's intolerance, citing the Inquisition, the Crusades and the religious wars.

However, in a recent essay, American Enterprise Fellow Derek Cross has re-examined the Catholic Church's historical resistance to the modern understanding of religious toleration. Modern philosophers feared the church would be a major competitor to the state's demand for allegiance.

In light of the virulence of their contempt for the church, Cross ar-

gues, Rome's resistance to simply embrace the Enlightenment's understanding of tolerance, as many Protestant sects did, was simply a survival tactic.

An early goal of Enlightenment political philosophy was the sublimation of religious belief to the power of the state. A vibrant Christianity threatened social cohesion; it asserted Christians have a duty to God and the church that existed prior to their political duties to the state.

The two other major modern political movements, Marxism and Fascism, attempted to undermine religious belief by expanding the state into the religious spheres of the culture, replacing them with a quasi-religious devotion to the state, or an opaque nationalism. In these systems, positive force was employed to coerce personal submission to the material and rational goals of the state.

Liberalism, however, implemented a different strategy. Eighteenth-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza argued that the state need not use force to implement its goal of eclipsing religion, but should simply use religion itself to eliminate religion.

By emphasizing religious toleration as a political virtue, Cross writes: "Spinoza predicted that this toleration of all religious beliefs will lead eventually to the dilution of religion. An ecumenism of indifference is the product, and religion is effectively defanged thereby. Freedom of religion enjoined by the sovereign lends him a greater authority over religion than he could ever hope to gain by attempting direct control."

In opposition to the modern philosophers' goal of diluting religious belief, Rome's hesitancy to promote absolute religious toleration is not as outrageous as it may first seem. To adopt the modern philosophers' understanding of religious liberty would be to deny God's dominion over the political sphere; each citizen would stand defenseless, naked in the face of the unrestrained will of the state.

Spinoza and his counterparts did not expect Christianity to survive into the so-called Age of Reason. Remarkably, the church resisted modernist and is living to watch the death of its foe.

Modernity succeeded in stripping the church of much of the force of its public condemnation of groups like the Boston Church. Ironically, the costs of their success in this one area may far outweigh any legitimate gripes they had with Rome.

When answered only by empty clamors for toleration, deforming heresies are free to run amok. For academics who sneer at the the Middle Ages, this lack of toleration may seem a small matter. I suspect that those with relatives in the Boston Church — those who are paying the costs of their ecumenism — might beg, literally, to differ.

Young is a first-year law student and a Daily Nebraskan columnist.

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Schramm	Tuesday, January 26	3:30 - 4:30 p.m.
Sandoz (Mac)	Wednesday, January 27	2:00 - 3:00 p.m.
Burr-Fedde	Thursday, January 28	2:30 - 3:30 p.m.
Introduction to WordPerfect 5.1 for IBM		
Sandoz (IBM)	Wednesday, January 27	3:00 - 4:30 p.m.
Advanced WordPerfect 5.1 for IBM		
Sandoz (IBM)	Wednesday, February 10	3:00 - 4:30 p.m.

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