

the
RIGHT
QUESTIONS

Anna Madsen and OMG:
Center for Theological Conversation

BY **Lori Walsh** PHOTOS BY **Emily Spartz**

There was a time when Anna Madsen could say that nothing really bad had happened to her.

"I was aware of injustice in the world," she explains. "But it was a theory. I had no (personal) knowledge of suffering."

As an ordained Lutheran pastor (ELCA), Madsen followed her vocation with compassion and intelligence. She was married to Bill Coning, also a pastor, and the couple had two beautiful children. They lived in Regensburg, Germany, and were looking forward to their return to the United States, where Madsen had accepted a teaching position at Augustana College.

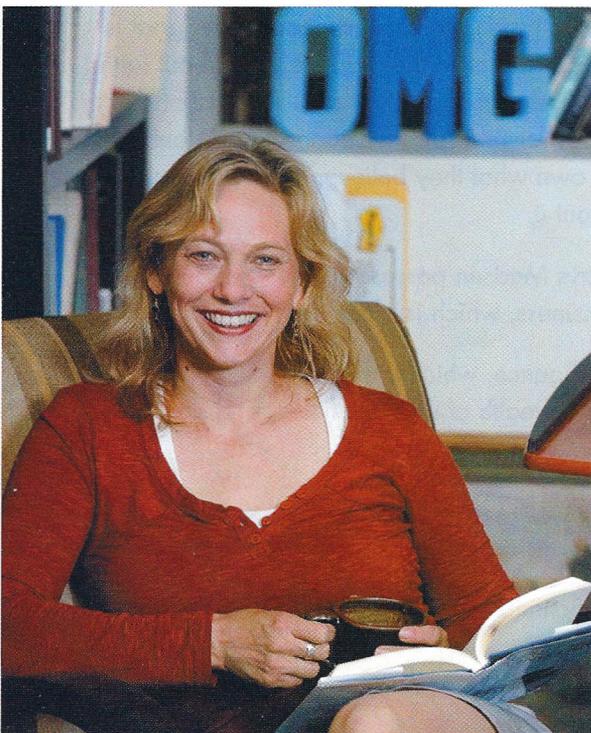
"I would talk to people about Jesus," she says. "But I would go home to Easter. I would preach about hope, but I had no idea how dark and persistent some people's Good Friday was."

And then, "every possible constellation" in her world changed.

It was an accident. The driver wasn't going too fast. Madsen's husband didn't make a mistake. There was no reason it happened. A car struck her husband and young son as they crossed the street. Bill Coning died. Karl, not quite 3 years old at the time, suffered a traumatic brain injury.

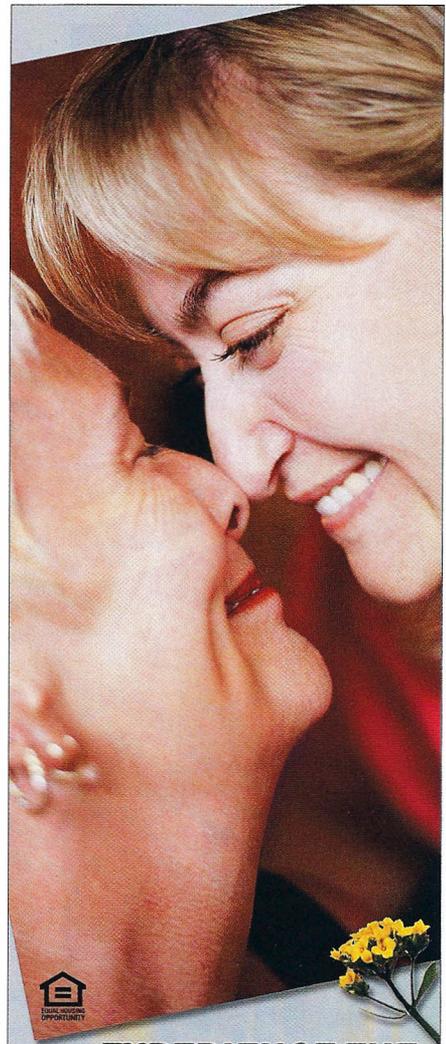
Madsen was an international conference presenter; she held a doctorate in systematic theology. She had earned her success, cherished her blessings. She had never fallen apart, collapsed or despaired. She had never cried out in anguish to God.

"When a ball comes at you, you hit it. I had no framework for not hitting it. In one swoop, everything I knew to be true suddenly wasn't."



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- ANNA MADSEN
.....



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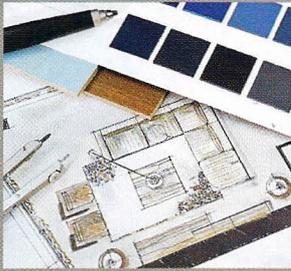
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Is the very idea of a logical and orderly belief structure absurd when faced with the chaos of the human experience? What is true? Where is God when we suffer?

Today, six years after her husband's death, Madsen relaxes into a chair at OMG: Center for Theological Conversation. It's a center she started in 2010 to create a safe place for people to explore their questions of faith.

"I finally realized that desperate people make desperate choices," she says. "They are reaching for life in the moment."

SACRED QUESTIONS

Dr. Murray Haar, chairman of Augustana's Religion Department, got to know Madsen after the accident.

"Because of this tragedy, we got into all these theological discussions. How can one talk about God in the midst of all this craziness?"

Haar asserts that the more questions people have, the more alive their faith is. In the Jewish tradition, Haar explains, questions are one way of honoring God, in part by recognizing that God knows the answers. The rest of us, Haar points out, are speculating.

OMG rests in a historic building in downtown Sioux Falls, near the entrance to Falls Park. Books line the walls. Madsen started OMG because people were coming to her with questions and doubts.

"So many would say, 'Anna, I need to talk to you about God and ...' fill in the blank. God and divorce. God and the election. God and homosexuality. There is something going on here. Plus, people are leaving the church – the thinkers, the curious – they hear faith language that doesn't speak to them anymore."

Madsen is a pastor, but she isn't trying to convert people. Her goal is simply to assist individuals and groups in their wonderings about faith. She is not a professional counselor, though she has a solid list of doctors and therapists at her fingertips for referral. If someone has a doubt, a question or simply wants to own what they believe, Madsen is willing to navigate a conversation about it.

Friend Connie Sweatman says Madsen possesses a "wonderful tolerance for ambiguity and messiness, which is often what life really is."

"Anna has this fabulous intelligence, which I respect tremendously. She integrates wisdom from a wealth of different fields, and she truly understands complexity."

Kerry and Carl Schmitzer came to OMG together. Both were taken with Madsen's openness and inquisitiveness.

"She challenges you," Carl Schmitzer says. "Everything she does is in the spirit of positive growth."

Kerry Schmitzer agrees.

"Anna's incredibly curious," she adds. "It's like having the college professor all to yourself in the room."

THEOLOGY ONLINE

One of Madsen's great strengths, the Schmitzers say, is her ability to create a safe haven for expanding notions of God and of self. Madsen's website, www.omgcenter.com, serves as a theological clearinghouse of sorts – a dialogue where seekers can ask questions and respond to Madsen's musings.

Madsen isn't afraid to initiate challenging conversations on the site. Each post is thoughtfully crafted, and passionate responses are common. She thanks readers for those responses, sometimes "precisely because we disagree."

"What Anna is trying to do here is build a bridge," Haar says. "She has opened the door and said it's OK to ask questions."

Death is very much a part of Anna Madsen's story, but, friends say, so is life. So is joy rising out of sorrow, confusion and loss.

"Death tries to shape us in all sorts of ways," Madsen says. "After the accident, I decided I'm not going to let it win again and again and again. The Bible says, 'Do not fear,' but it never says there is nothing to be afraid of. Death is real. But life is real-er."

When Madsen speaks of death, the shadows of sadness don't drain the vibrancy from her face. She is reverent, yes, but, like a child who giggles during a somber Good Friday service, Madsen knows what comes next. For her, it's all about Easter.

"I really believe that God's ultimate agenda is that life wins." 

A WEEKEND WORKSHOP ABOUT HEAVEN AND HELL

WHEN: 4 to 6 p.m., Sept. 23 and 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Sept. 24

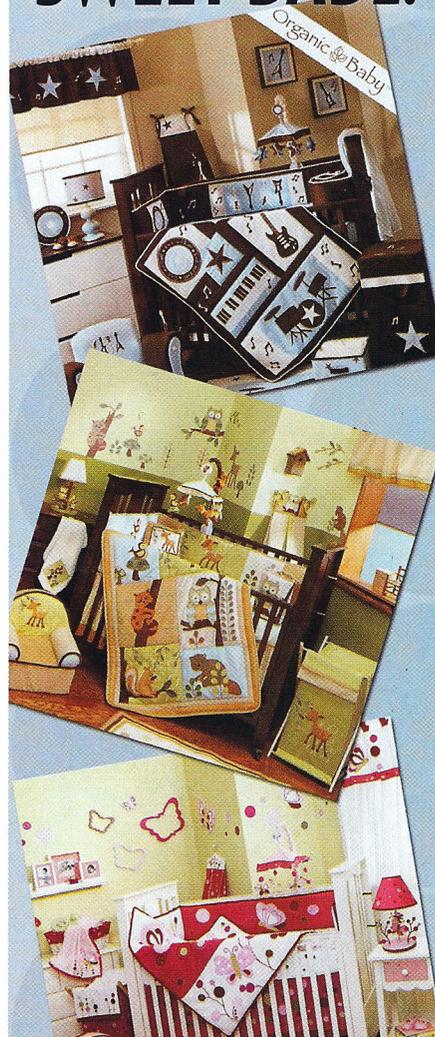
COST: \$175 (includes a snack on Friday and breakfast, lunch and snack on Saturday)

REGISTER: Email info@omgcenter.com. Limited to 25 people.

From Madsen: We'll look at several different theological systems of belief and how they shape their believers' views about heaven and hell.

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