

## Book Review

# Laughing in a Waterfall

## A Mother's Memoir by Marianne Dietzel

REVIEWED BY RONALD E. KOETZSCH

On the sunny autumn morning of November 29, 1996, Nina Dietzel, eighteen years old, her lifelong friend, Kirsten Bergh, seventeen, and Linda Bergh, Kirsten's mother, were driving to shop at a Salvation Army store in Hudson, New York. The girls had recently come from Minneapolis to attend the high school of the Hawthorne Valley (Waldorf) School, and Linda was visiting. Kirsten was driving. The car hit a patch of black ice on the two-lane country road and skidded out of control into the path of a huge, oncoming semi-trailer truck. Nina and Kirsten were killed instantly, and Linda was seriously injured.

A few hours later, in Minneapolis, Marianne Dietzel, Nina's mother, learned from her husband, Dennis, of their only daughter's death. Thus began Marianne's journey from unspeakable grief to an understanding and acceptance of Nina's death and to a celebration of her brief life, a journey recorded in this memoir.

The book is in part a chronicle of Nina's life and of her deep, "destiny" friendship with Kirsten Bergh. Some of her childhood was spent in Minneapolis, where she attended the Minnesota Waldorf School and where she got to know Kirsten in kindergarten. Some was spent at Camphill Village Minnesota. This community, which Nina's parents had chosen to be



Kirsten Bergh and Nina Dietzel at the Minneapolis airport, August 31, 1996, about to leave for Harlemville, New York

part of, is dedicated to the care of persons in need of special care. It is based, like Waldorf Education, on the work of Rudolf Steiner. Despite periods of separation, Nina and Kirsten maintained their close relationship.

Because there was no Waldorf high school in Minneapolis, Nina

attended a large public high school. After her junior year, she and Kirsten both decided that they wanted to return to a Waldorf school. They applied to the Hawthorne Valley School in Harlemville, New York, were accepted, and on August 31, 1996, left Minneapolis for New York. They moved into the home of one of the high school teachers and started school. The accident occurred less than three months later.

The book also chronicles the inner and outer experiences of Marianne, Dennis, and their two sons following Nina's death. It bears witness to the consolation and healing that can be provided, even in the most horrific circumstance, by family, compassionate friends, community support, music and singing, ritual, and by a worldview that affirms the reality of the spirit.

For Marianne and Dennis, both students of Anthroposophy—the worldview taught by Rudolf Steiner—death is not the end of life but only the transition to another, spiritual form of conscious being. And the family has indeed experienced Nina as alive and present in their lives. The book's title comes from their experience at a waterfall of Nina's spirit beaming down at them from the top of the cataract. Marianne and Dennis also believe that every event, even the tragic death of a beloved young person, has meaning and purpose.

Confronting the terror and the mystery of death is one of our inevitable tasks as human beings. Marianne Dietzel's memoir of her daughter, Nina, provides an example of how and how well that may be done.

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*Two souls sailing alone in  
a great sea  
were blown together  
into the same harbor to  
rest.*

*She gave me the moon  
and so I have given her  
the sun.*

*Now we dance  
forever in the moonshine  
while sunbeams  
gently caress our cheeks.*

—Nina Dietzel