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CINDY WOODSMALL
& MIRIAM FLAUD



PLAIN
WISDOM



AN INVITATION
into AN AMISH HOME
and the HEARTS *of* TWO WOMEN

PLAIN WISDOM

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PLAIN WISDOM

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FROM MIRIAM:

*To my awesome family: my husband, Daniel, and my children,
David, Jacob, Mervin, Michael, Amanda, and Mark.
To my wonderful daughters-in-law: Martha, Naomi, and Miriam.
To my precious grandchildren: Jolaine, Michael, Timothy,
Mervin, and J. R.
My love for all of you knows no bounds.*

*To my sisters, whom I love,
and to my friends—both Amish and English alike—
I cherish each of you.*

FROM CINDY:

*To Dad, Kathy, Leston, and Mark.
If we'd known then what we know now, we'd have
cherished each other more.
Our yesterdays are gone. Our tomorrows may never be.
But your indelible fingerprints are all over my heart,
at least until I reach eternity.
To my agent, Steve Laube.
I came to you with a heart's desire...and you heard me.
You counseled, cautioned, and encouraged—every word
wise and helpful.
You've poured years of support into helping Miriam and me
bring Plain Wisdom to fruition.*

*From the book's title, writing style, pacing, and voice
to the idea for the cover, your creative and technical guidance
is in every part of this work.*

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INTRODUCTION

In 2001 Miriam and I lived seven hundred miles apart geographically—but a century apart by customs. Miriam is an Old Order Amish woman trying to keep the Old Ways and avoid modernization. I am a typical American woman trying to keep up with the constant changes in technology while meeting the expectations of society, church, parents, and peers. We didn't know each other, but we had a mutual friend, and because of her, Miriam and I talked on the phone occasionally and shared letters regularly.

When Miriam invited me to visit her in 2002, I had no way of knowing how much we'd have in common. As our friendship grew, we began to realize that we've had many of the same life experiences, and we have approached them in faith and with some trepidation. Between us, we've given birth to nine babies—four we've ushered into adulthood; the others are now older teens or preteens. And both of us are still standing. Our cultural differences are vast; the more time I spend with Miriam, the more I realize just how different. Yet our methods for emotionally and spiritually dealing with life and work are remarkably similar.

In the visits since 2002, as we sat together, hedged in by her lilac bushes and sipping on coffee, a dream began to grow inside us. We wanted to share with other women our victories and defeats, what had and hadn't worked for us, and to encourage them by being real and vulnerable. Our friendship has shown us that whatever culture we live in, successes are possible...and failures are inevitable, but they're never final when placed in His hands.

As women we easily believe in the worth of a newborn, who can give nothing and takes much. We hold fast to hope for our children's future, even for those teens who fight us every step of the way. We can see our

friends' lives through the eyes of faith. Yet when we think of ourselves, we often wallow in unforgiveness, self-loathing, and feelings of inadequacy.

Our desire is to help you embrace the beauty of the life God has given you. We wrote *Plain Wisdom* to encourage you to accept yourself, forgive yourself, challenge yourself, laugh at yourself, and, most important, see yourself through God's eyes of love. For when you do, you will find the freedom to truly enjoy your life.

Plain Wisdom is a collection of events in our lives—from early childhood to just a few months ago—and lessons we've learned, insights we've discovered, words of wisdom, Amish recipes, pictures of the Amish culture, and even a touch of Amish and “Englischer,” or English (non-Amish), humor. In some cases we draw the lessons from our stories; at other times we'll let the events speak for themselves, allowing the Holy Spirit to whisper to readers' hearts through the details.

Our hope and prayer are that these memories will encourage and strengthen you as you create memories within your friend and family circles.



MEET MIRIAM AND CINDY

Then Peter opened his mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him.

—ACTS 10:34–35

From Miriam

In the early eighteenth century, my ancestors crossed the Atlantic Ocean, traveling from Switzerland to America to escape persecution for their religious beliefs. As an Old Order Amish woman, I call myself the “Plain” part of *Plain Wisdom*. (Perhaps that makes Cindy the “Wisdom” part.)

I was born in St. Mary’s County in southern Maryland, the third of seven children. When I was a year old, we moved to Adams County, Pennsylvania. My home was always filled with family from both my mom’s and my dad’s sides. Then, when I was eleven, my parents bought a farm in the neighboring Franklin County. Today my husband and I live on the farm where he grew up, which is within walking distance of my parents’ place.

When one is born into an Amish household, he or she is expected to remain Amish and eventually join the church. The youth are encouraged to join the faith in their teen years. For me, like for most Amish youth, the question wasn’t, would I join? but rather, when would I take that step?

So when the desire and the appropriate age came together, I, along with six other young women and six young men, took the first steps by attending instruction classes. A church leader teaches instruction classes, and, similar to courses held by other faiths, the purpose of instruction is to clarify the founding principles and scriptures of our faith. The lessons begin in late spring and continue throughout the summer. Meanwhile, I was courted by a handsome young man named Daniel Flaud, who was from the same youth group and church. The following year we were married. Eighteen months later we were blessed with our first son. As the years went by, we had four more sons and a daughter. Now, nearly thirty years later, our family has welcomed three daughters-in-law and five grandchildren.

I've enjoyed my life inside one of the most structured societies in the United States. I haven't always known what to do, agreed with the rules, or handled situations with wisdom. But I've experienced the abundant joys as well as the occasional frustration our lifestyle brings.

Often when we meet people, we see our own lives differently—perhaps better in some ways and worse in others. Sometimes we choose to stay inside our familiar circles so we can avoid the discomforts that are a part of building new friendships. Cindy's world was so very different than mine. Sophisticated. Filled with technology. And by my Plain standards, it was worldly. I invite you to come along as I prepared to welcome her into my home.

From Cindy

Some of you know me as the author of fiction books with Amish settings and characters. But, like Miriam, my family roots trace back to Europe (specifically to Scotland), and my ancestors landed in America in the mid-seventeen hundreds. I was born in Washington DC, the youngest child in a family of four. When my parents were growing up, their family lives were tough, and they had almost no support. But when they married

in their teenage years, they were determined to beat the odds and make a success out of their lives.

My family moved frequently when I was growing up. My dad would buy an old home in need of repair, and he and Mom would fix it up while living in it. Then they would sell it, and the process would start all over again. No matter where we lived, my vivid imagination constantly wove fictional stories of family life, romance, and conflict.

The summer between my eighth- and ninth-grade years in school, my family moved from Maryland to Alabama. Because of that move, I eventually met and married Tommy. A few years after that, we had our first son, and I became a full-time homemaker. Two years later I gave birth to our second son. I homeschooled our two boys through middle school, and we welcomed a third son into our home in 1994.

Throughout the years my mind had continued to devise fictional stories, but I was never willing to invest time in writing them. The story ideas were ceaseless, and, in hopes of quieting them, I began writing as a hobby in 1999. In 2002 I attended my first writers' conference¹ and then fell in love with the whole writing process.

I've enjoyed the freedom and opportunity granted to American women—whether it was choosing what church to attend, how to school our children, or what career path to take. But like Miriam, I haven't always known what to do, agreed with all the rules that bound me, or handled every situation with wisdom. I, too, have experienced the abundant joys of my lifestyle as well as the frustrations.

One of the great blessings in my life is having been invited into Miriam's home and into her life. Neither of us could have imagined what that initial visit would lead to as I anxiously went from my world into hers.

Come, travel with me as I entered her world for the first time.



WHEN PLAIN MEETS FANCY

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him...But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!

—ECCLESIASTES 4:9–10, NIV

From Miriam 2002

The sound of a push reel mower could be heard from my kitchen window as my son Mark made the last few rounds in the front yard. We had been looking forward to this day for months. Cindy Woodsmall and her son Tyler were expected to arrive at any minute. While I chopped veggies for the salad for that night's supper, my daughter, Amanda, hurriedly swept the kitchen one more time as we anxiously watched the road for our company.

Cindy and I had chosen the second week in June because my husband, Daniel, was planning to be in Maine that week on a timber-framing job. We thought this would give us lots of chat time—just the moms and our six children, three of which had full-time summer jobs. Daniel would be here when she arrived, but I knew he'd have to leave soon afterward. As the time of her arrival drew near, I found myself wishing my husband could stay. He's the social one, able to maintain interesting conversations with anyone. Suddenly I went from being a little nervous to a lot nervous.

What if she came all this way and was disappointed not only in my ability to hold a reasonable conversation but also in me as a person? We'd shared letters and long phone conversations, but what if I fell way short of her expectations once we were together?

After their arrival Daniel kept the conversation lively for about an hour, but then he had to leave. The house grew silent and the conversation became stilted the moment he left. Cindy and I spent the afternoon trying to break the ice, and then that evening we gathered around the dining room table to share a meal. My still-in-the-nest children—three in their teens and two elementary-school age—are usually quite talkative at dinnertime, but they were awfully quiet that evening. With my husband gone, I took my place in his chair at the head of the table, and I felt very uncomfortable doing so. I tried to think of things to say but found myself lost in a sea of wishing that Daniel were home.

Cindy and Tyler were very quiet also as everyone passed the food around the table and filled their plates. Cindy put some salad on her plate, so I handed her the salad dressing. A moment later I heard her gasp in dismay. A quick glance told me she'd mistaken our regular salad dressing bottle for a squeeze type, resulting in a plate full of food covered in salad dressing. Poor girl, I felt so bad for her. Before me stood the opportunity to continue being extremely polite or just to be me. I chose to be me. Leaning in, I quietly said, "I'm sorry, Cindy, but the Amish are forbidden to have the handy squeeze bottles."

Her eyes grew as big as saucers, her mouth formed a perfect little O. For a few seconds she actually thought I was serious. Then we burst into laughter, and the ice broke. Completely. From that moment on, our days flew by. We talked freely over coffee as the sun rose the next morning; we laughed together as she tried to do chores the Amish way; we cried together while sharing our heartaches; we watched our boys ride horses and foot scooters while they chatted ceaselessly; and we gave them freedom to fish from a nearby dock without our hovering (but we watched from inside the house). And when they didn't catch enough for supper,

we quietly baked frozen fish sticks without their ever realizing what we'd done. After the sun went down, we made s'mores over a fire in the backyard.

All too soon the week came to an end, and it was time for Cindy and Tyler to go back home to their world. It had been a great week, and I feasted on the memories until time for her to visit again.

From Cindy

Miriam's garden still needed more weeding as the sun slid below the horizon, taxing my ability to distinguish between weeds and produce. Laundry on the clothesline flapped in the evening breeze, and supper dishes sat in the sink, reminding Miriam and me that we'd moved too slowly through the chores as I'd spent the day learning to handle the summertime responsibilities of an Amish woman.

Tomorrow Miriam's morning would begin before daylight as she prepared breakfasts, packed lunches, and passed around clean clothes for her three oldest sons. The boys had already graduated from the eighth grade in their one-room schoolhouse and now apprenticed full-time within the Amish community.

After crossing the lawn without the assistance of floodlights or lampposts, we checked on our youngest children. They sat around a campfire with one of Miriam's teen sons, roasting marshmallows and making s'mores. The fireflies they'd caught earlier glowed in a jar beside them, waiting to be released.

Miriam and I went separate ways to finish the day's work, she to the clothesline and I to the kitchen. As I washed dishes by a kerosene lamp, I could see her silhouette bathed in moonlight as she collected the last of the laundry. Wiping sweat from my face, I heard her call to the children, telling them it was almost bedtime.

While Miriam's children doused the campfire, my son made his way inside, washed up at the mud sink, and waited for me to escort him through the dark home. I took the kerosene lamp, and we climbed the

wooden, spiral stairway. A mule brayed, cows mooed, and bullfrogs from a nearby pond croaked—all quite loudly. I smiled, but I knew that before sleep came, I'd long for some electrical device to block out the sounds of the farm and stir the summer's humid air.



Today I look back to that first visit eight years ago. As a resident of Georgia, I had doubted I could find a way to talk to someone who was part of the Old Order Amish life, but I had a story in my heart, and I needed an inside view of Plain living to be able to write it.

Growing up in Maryland, I'd had an Amish Mennonite best friend, and our adventures—along with the reservations our parents had concerning our friendship—had sparked my desire to write about the joys and difficulties of relationships, both within the Amish community and with outsiders. But as with many writers, I didn't actually begin to put those stories on paper until decades later. Long before I sat down to write, my family had moved away, and my Amish Mennonite friend and I had lost all contact.

But in 2001, Linda, a friend who had worked at an Amish birthing center and as an EMT among the Amish, knew of Miriam and had connected the two of us. This connection began the long-distance relationship. More than a year into this relationship, Miriam invited me to visit her place.

This was the first of what has become at least a yearly visit. I've been greatly blessed by the friendship with Miriam and her family. She and I marvel that forging a friendship was easier than either of us expected. It took us one evening, really, and a plate full of salad dressing.