

**“To Their Own Ends: Women’s Words in the *Martyrs Mirror* “
by Jean Kilheffer Hess**

1. It is difficult to imagine the resolve of religious dissenters in the sixteenth through the early eighteenth centuries who gave their lives for their faith. If someone among you has a copy of the *Martyrs Mirror*, look at it together. Read an account from the book or from Jean Kilheffer Hess’s article. Imagine that you are a bystander, a fellow Anabaptist, or a local official charged with upholding the law on religious conformity. How would you react at the execution of a dissenter?
2. *Martyrs Mirror*, of course, is not biblical, but it has some features of a sacred text. What comparisons would you draw between *Martyrs Mirror* and the faith testimonies of the Gospel writers, for instance? And how would you compare the stories of Anabaptist women martyrs with women listed in Matthew 1 (Tamar, Ruth, Rahab, Mary)?
3. In his book *Doing Oral History*, Donald Ritchie says, “Oral history does not simplify the historical narrative but makes it more complex—and more interesting.” If the people who recorded the last words of the martyrs aren’t trying to give a simple account of what happened, what kinds of things are they trying to say?
4. Hess notes that the culture in the sixteenth century gave women very little power in society, yet the same culture feared the power of Anabaptist women who spoke out about their faith. Who has the least power in our culture—immigrants? minorities? children? others? To what extent are they feared? Why?
5. Most of us have seen some improvisational theater in which actors seem to create scenarios from thin air, but Hess argues that “most improv comedy practice demonstrates that spontaneous group creation usually taps into reserves of shared references, received truth, and common knowledge.” The martyrs of the sixteenth century had not rehearsed their testimonies exactly, but they lived in a subculture of dissent. They learned the logic and phrasing of the martyr’s testimony. What shared references do we use spontaneously today in the church?