

Born Remembering

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR Elise Boulding is professor of sociology at the University of Colorado, and is a practicing Quaker, teaching in the Boulder Friends Meeting First Day School and participating in the Meeting's extended family project. She joined Friends the same year she joined Kenneth Boulding in matrimony — 1941. She gave the William Penn Lecture on “The Joy That Is Set Before Us” (1956) while in the process of translating Fred Polak's *Image of the Future*, the English version of which was published in 1961. Meanwhile the five Boulding children were growing up, and these family experiences resulted in *Friends Testimonies in the Home* (1962) and *The Fruits of Solitude for Children* (1963).

Several studies of women in the peace movement brought her back to sociology. As first editor of the International Peace Research Newsletter, and as chairperson of both the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and of the North American Consortium on Peace Research, Education, and Development (COPRED) she has linked a concern for the international community with continuing research, while her involvement with family life has expressed itself in such articles as “The Family as an Agent of Social Change,” “The Child as Shaper of the Future,” and more recently, “The Child and Non-Violent Social Change.” But the present essay is a departure from these social areas, for it takes her into the realm of personal devotion and the spirit. It will be included as a chapter in the Tulane Catholic Center's forthcoming collection, *Freedom in Christ*.

Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home.

Wordsworth, *Intimations of Immortality*

Everyone has had some experience of early childhood remembering: remembering an otherness not to be explained by family experiences, stories heard, events witnessed. Why is it that we are born remembering, and live forgetting? Is this a joke that God would share with us, but that we can only laugh at in the moment when we have come full circle, and remember again? That coming full circle and remembering again is no laughing matter however. It is a conversion experience, literally, and life cannot go on as before. This happened to me very recently, and I am going to spend these pages in reflecting on the remembering, and the forgetting, and the remembering, as I have experienced it in my own life.

There are cues for remembering in my own early childhood. I grew up in a tiny immigrant Scandinavian community in a small factory town outside Newark, New Jersey. Everyone had come over from the old country to seek a better life — in part for themselves, but most especially for their children. It was a kindly community and we had many festive occasions together in the group of a dozen families or so that had relatives spread out over northern New Jersey — Long Island — Brooklyn. Thinking back over the many feast days we shared together, and especially the holy days of Christmas and Easter, I am suddenly struck by the fact that no one in our community ever went to church. We knew of a Lutheran church where evening services were held in Norwegian, but no one ever went. We all knew that it was good that the church was there, and every home had a Bible in it. I have a distinct memory of someone's aged great-grandmother in a lace cap sitting

quietly reading the Bible when the rest of us were being jolly. But religion was never discussed.

For all the jollity of our times together — and I used to love going to those parties right up to my early teen years — there was nevertheless an underlying air of anxiety in that community. This was in the 1920's and early 30's. Did everyone have a job? The best possible job? Were promotions coming? Were the men "succeeding"? Were the children doing well in school? One family knew some mysterious important people in New York. Could they be gotten to put in a word in the right place for a hardworking father, or a promising child? Sometimes yes, sometimes no. So while we all had lots of affection, a lot was expected of us too. And I, along with all the other children of those families, had to justify the emigration by my life performance. This was the process that I continued working out until the 50th year of my life.

In my own family, besides the expectations, there was also an unseen Presence. That is how I know I was born remembering. My mother and father never talked about God, never used petitionary prayer, and only read the Bible once a year, on Christmas Eve. Yet God was present. Father had been given the great old Norwegian family Bible when he was a young man. He was the youngest son in a large family and by rights the oldest should have had this Bible. But grandfather always felt that my father had a religious calling.

As a child father had been even more somber than I. If he indeed had a call, he resisted it in the sense that he never trained for or practiced a religious vocation. Shy, he became an engineer and poured out his love for God and his wife and children in the ways that shy people can: through a thousand affectionate deeds. And on Christmas Eve the family Bible came to the supper table, and father read the Christmas story from Luke by candlelight. He almost sang the words, he loved them so. Afterwards we lighted the tree (my earliest memories are of real candles) and joined hands to dance around it. First we walked sedately and sang

the Norwegian carols about the babe who lived in His Parents' house in heaven but came down to us on this evening long ago. The dancing songs that came later were fun, but I always loved the carols about the babe best.

God was not only present on Christmas Eve, but every evening; first as we bowed our heads before dinner and said "Gud velsigne maten, Amen," and then at bedtime as I prayed the Lords prayer aloud in Norwegian with my mother sitting by my side. Why did we begin each dinner with grace, and why did she teach me that prayer? I can only say that my parents were giving me, in the only way they knew, something from the very depths of their being. The grace, the Lord's Prayer, the Luke story and the Christmas carols were the full extent of my religious nurture in the family as a child — in any overt sense, that is.

What led me so often to sit quietly in my room listening to God when I was little? To struggle with reading the English Bible (the Norwegian was too hard for me) back from Luke to Genesis, and forward to Revelation? Listening to God is one of my clearest childhood memories. There was always a quiet inner space I could go into, a listening place. I listened while picking blueberries in a sweet-smelling meadow; while lying in the bottom of a rowboat rocking on the ripples of a small mountain lake; while curled up on the living room couch leafing through the reproductions of Norwegian paintings that were among the few treasures brought from our home in Norway.

I wasn't listening for voices. Yet the sense of God's presence was often with me. What could it be but remembering? It became so strong that by the time I was nine I found a church with a Sunday school so I could study more about the Bible. I do not know how I came to choose the church I did. It was some distance away — perhaps two miles. I walked back and forth alone, and never missed a Sunday. The pastor's wife taught a high school class which I used to think about wistfully. I loved my own class, but

the teacher didn't know what to do with my questions. After a year or two — certainly long before I was in high school — the pastor's wife took me aside one day and asked if I would like to come into her class.

God bless Mrs. Northwood! She sensed that here was someone longing to learn what she was longing to teach! In her class we never worked with anything but the Bible itself. How those hours flew! Sometimes she would invite me to her home after school, and read Henry Van Dyke aloud to me in her living room. Reverend Northwood and his wife were both pastors in the truest sense of the word. They had a calling to make God's presence real for others. I don't recall that Reverend Northwood had any special oratorical gifts, but his sermons always held me completely because I felt he *knew* God. To this day going into any church and sitting down in a pew fills me with an unreasoning sense of joyful anticipation. Another legacy from those years is the fact that I have found ways to continue year after year to teach Sunday School, even after our own children have all left home. I love to share with children what was shared with me when I was a child.

The fact that I have been able in some way to reach back to the early rememberings, to the freshness of the feeling of God's presence as I knew it when small, has been enormously important in keeping what wholeness there has been in my life. The inner listening place I developed so early has always been there for me in a very conscious way during times of unbearable stress. It is a space that cannot be crowded. And yet, as an adult, I lost the feeling of the immanence of God's presence. I only remembered the space.

All children are listeners, but some stop listening and remembering sooner than others. When our own children came, I was very conscious of their need for listening when they were small. When I realized that many parents feared that their children might be abnormal if they spent too much time alone, I studied the accounts of children's listening in

Quaker and other autobiographies and put them into a little pamphlet for parents, published by Pendle Hill under the title *Children and Solitude*.

It makes me sad when I hear discussions about not introducing children to “God” until they are old enough to understand. I grew into the Lords prayer, and I am still growing into it. All religious language, all devotional books, and particularly the Bible, provide growing room for young minds and spirits. Because they have sometimes been used as straitjackets by adults who did not understand, does not mean that they cure straitjackets.

While I knew Jesus the babe who came down from God’s house to be with us, the other Jesus, the elder brother, the teacher, the Lord, did not become a part of my life until those Sunday school years a little later. I came to understand that while God is present across an unmeasurable farawayness, Jesus is present in the nearness of a friend; while God teaches through being, Jesus teaches through speaking and doing. But these understandings did not come smoothly. Giving Jesus his “right” place has never been easy for me, perhaps because I loved God first. Was it perhaps a little bit like the experience of the only child having to make room for a sibling? Nonsense, of course, because Jesus is in the first place the elder brother, and furthermore he is not a displacer but a way-shower. Still, the struggle has been there.

Since I needed a teacher, I came to love Him as a teacher. A little later I went through the “Jesus as boyfriend” stage. During several summers spent in the environment of lusty religious enthusiasm at Ocean Grove on the Jersey shore I discovered this unexpected dimension of Jesus when I was otherwise boyfriendless. That way of relating to Jesus did not last long, because it did violence to the Otherness which religion invoked for me.

Many years later, very unexpectedly, I came to experience Jesus in an inward way as a teaching Presence.

I had been going through a spiritually dry period and at a small Quaker gathering was engaged in one of those verbal harangues on spiritual matters that we often use to cover our own emptiness. Suddenly He was there, silent and intent, and I heard and saw my babbling self. Quieting down quickly, I felt taught without words. He stayed with me for some days after that, and returns from time to time but not often. He does not come in times of crisis, but in times of spiritual barrenness.

When did I discover Mary? I am not sure how old I was, but standing one day before her statue in a small village Catholic church I felt her presence. There has never been any ambivalence in my feelings about Mary. Mother, sister, holy lady, she was with me through all the turbulent high school days, through all the vicissitudes of my atheistic period during college and has stayed with me ever since. I prayed to her countless times during the early years of our marriage when it seemed as if we would never have children. When the babies started coming, she was close to me through each of the five pregnancies. Though I am sure the children would be astonished to hear me say it, she helped me raise them. In dark times, I find a Catholic church and kneel before Mary. While intellectually I know that I don't need a statue to kneel before, I accept my childlike spirituality when I need her strength.

My last year in high school was full of the turbulence of the insecure achieving adolescent. There was no money to send me to college; my two younger sisters born 10 and 12 years after me, and whom I loved and mothered, would need the modest family resources even to see them through high school. Yet the whole migration to America had been so my generation could go to college — an achievement unthinkable for our status and income group in Norway. With his whole soul my father wanted his three daughters to go to college! The day I won a scholarship that would cover almost the total cost of tuition, room and board for

four years was a great day for our family. It also meant a new addition to a familiar burden — I would now have to redouble my efforts to justify that original migration, by also justifying the scholarship through my college years. Fearing weakness, I suddenly saw my love of God as a sign of weakness. My religion was a crutch, and I must learn to walk alone, to be strong.

The college application form which routinely asked my religious faith produced a torrential denial of religious belief, covering pages which were appended to the application form. To me the whole world seemed to hang on what I said, though this lengthy document had no place in college routines and probably went into the waste-basket as unfileable!

My stiff, intellectually impeccable deportment through college with regard to things religious was occasionally modified by visits to what seemed to me intellectually respectable places like the Christian Science church and the Quaker meeting. Since religion had been so central for me since earliest childhood, life was too bleak with *nothing*.

The Quakers unexpectedly touched me — “spoke to my condition” — in the straightforward words of George Fox, the first Quaker. Not very deeply at first, because I was wearing a heavy armor of rationalism that nothing could get through. The silence of the Meeting was a reminder of my own childhood listening place, however, and there was no gainsaying my at-homeness there.

The first year out of college, when I went to New York to conquer the world and found myself first running a billing machine in one publishing house and then rewriting impossible high school textbooks in another, was the first major time of reckoning for me. Did success and justification lie in this crowded, noisy, competitive city?

I worked hard at my jobs because I was trained to do that. I also participated in a kind of office party life which left me feeling confused and out of touch with reality. It was a value world I had had no previous experience with. But in

between the parties the Lord led me to some lovely places. A freckle-faced young man at the next editorial desk to mine was a devout Catholic and ardent pacifist, and spent his free time working with a Catholic hospitality house in Harlem run by a woman I knew only as the Baroness. Now while religion had not been verbally articulated very much in my home, pacifism had. My mother must have been one of the most ardent pacifists of her generation, although circumstances placed her in settings where she never connected with peace movements of any kind. In my high school years in the middle 1930's she was pouring out plays, essays and poems on pacifism as the early war clouds gathered in Europe. So my office friend spoke a language I understood, though I had never met peace movements either in high school or college.

The day he took me to visit the Baroness' store front center was a real turning point for me. To find in that sordid city (New York seemed very sordid to me though I also loved it) a place where people very frankly and openly loved God and fiercely worked with and on behalf of Negroes was like being lost in the dark and suddenly finding home — though the home was so different from anything I had known that I could not be totally at ease there. I had lived among ethnics all my life, both North and South European, but never among blacks. The Baroness — Catherine de Hueck — was a Russian émigré who ruled the little Harlem Center with all the grandeur of one accustomed to walk with tsars and princes, but she was also a person with great purity of heart. Later she started a remarkable spiritual-cum-social action community in Canada. This lady of rank made a profound impression on me. She was not the least bit interested in being a "success" in America. She lived in poverty, and wore that poverty like court jewels. She was as brave and independent a person as I had ever seen, yet was not afraid to be on her knees in prayer. With a critical mind that cut like a knife through fuzzy thinking, she nevertheless saw

all social reality as at core a spiritual reality. The defenses I had acquired so painfully in my college years were useless here.

Another lovely place the Lord led me to was John Haynes Holmes' church (Town Hall on Sunday mornings). Here I heard one of the great pacifist preachers of my youth, and again saw a person of stature frankly loving God with all his heart, and using his intellect in ways I did not dare use mine.

I heard of Dorothy Day, editor of the *Catholic Worker*, but never met her. Having carried an image of her in my heart ever since that long-ago time in New York, I was delighted beyond belief to find, when I finally met her last year, that she is as young in spirit now as she was in years then. Thirty years in time were erased!

The impact that these persons made on my life was out of all proportion to my contact with them. I did not stay in New York more than five months in all. The contrast between the moral stature of the Baroness and Holmes and my own life was too great. I realized that I was in the wrong place. I almost lost my inner listening space because I could not cope with the city. One day it became absolutely clear to me that I could not cope. What turned out to be a very minor stomach upset and skin rash had announced itself to me as the voice of doom, and I literally fled the city.

Based briefly with my family again, I started modestly back to school, having found my way to a small graduate student stipend. The campus seemed a safe haven for my battered soul. instinctively I sought out the Friends Meeting, but I also found a Catholic church with a statue of Mary I could visit. Mary's presence and the Quaker silence together got me anchored. Shortly afterwards I met Kenneth Boulding at a Quaker meeting for worship. The signals were so clear to both of us (and apparently to the entire Quaker community of Upstate New York) that we were to share our lives, that we announced our intentions of marriage only 17 days after we had met.

While in one way I had been preparing for the world Kenneth Boulding introduced me to all my life, in another way this was a new world to me. It was the Baroness and John Haynes Holmes, Quaker version. Kenneth's own deep spirituality released the last of my own inhibitions about the religious dimension. He was himself going through a period of great religious stress at that time, suffering because his family back in England was enduring the bombing raids from Germany while he was sitting safe in America. His intellectual analysis of the futility of war and his religious commitment to peace combined to produce, during the course of that year we met, the first in a long series of books that were to lay the foundation for the peace research movement, and the poems that have become a much loved spiritual classic, *There Is a Spirit: The Naylor Sonnets*. He was as gifted in the ministry then as he is now, and when he spoke in Meeting the tears often rolled down my cheeks in love and joy and compassion for this extraordinary man who was to be my husband.

We read aloud a lot to each other in those days, and Brother Lawrence prepared me best for the years ahead:

That in the winter, seeing a tree stripped of its leaves, and considering that within a little time the leaves would be renewed, and after that the flowers and fruit appear, he received a high view of the providence and power of God, which has never since been effaced from his soul. That this view had perfectly set him loose from the world, and kindled in him such a love for God that he could not tell whether it had increased during the more than forty years he had lived since.

The Practice of the Presence of God, pp. 11-12

My own heart was so full when I read this that I felt I could never love God more than I did at that moment. And when the occasional twinges came, about whether I really

should marry just then, or whether I should go overseas and do the reconstruction work I was in training for during our “courting summer,” Brother Lawrence again spoke:

That our sanctification did not depend upon changing our works, but in doing that for God’s sake which we commonly do for our own.

Ibid. p. 23

Kenneth and I took the founding of our little Quaker “Colony of Heaven,” as he later described marriage in his “Sonnet for a Quaker Wedding,” both seriously and joyfully. We did indeed endeavor to make our home a center of tranquility and peace, that all who entered might find refreshment therein, according to the old Quaker advice. It was always a community center, and when the children came it was a children’s center, too. Because we had waited so long for them to come, each of the children seemed a very special blessing. I used to stand over their cribs and pray at night when they were asleep. By day we endeavored to keep a Quakerly peace, but with turbulent boys it was not always easy. Before our third child (and only daughter) was born I wrote a little pamphlet on Quaker family life, *Friends Testimonies in the Home*. I knew so little then — how differently it would have sounded had I waited until the fifth was born! But it was done lovingly.

These were for the most part happy years, and I found myself often thanking God in the midst of the mundane tasks like changing a messy diaper. It seemed to me that it was in those tasks that God’s love shone most clearly. This was the meaning of incarnation. I used to keep the words of Brother Lawrence and John Woolman, and others that particularly spoke to me, on cards above the kitchen stove. During the times that I felt overflowing love I wanted to sit down and write some of my prayers and reflections to share with other mothers. I knew that all were not as happy as I. And knowing how hard my own somber times were, I wanted

to share when the joy was there. I truly regret that I did not, but it was almost a physical impossibility during the years when I was spiritually most ready to do it. The daily round with five small children is such that there are few moments a mother can take in quiet.

When our fifth child was born we really were a *large* family! A Quaker meeting, like a Catholic parish, is a fine place to bring children up when families do many things together — worship, play, and share the ups and downs of life. There was a group of about six families in our meeting that shared so much that in a sense we all raised each other's children and to this day we are one huge extended family, traveling any distance to be together for special life events like the next generation's marriages. We were all equally active in the peace movement, and in local community projects. While we were all also concerned with the nurturance of the inward life in our families and meeting, the community action often got in the way of the nurturance. I was not the only young mother in the community who had a need to justify my existence! There was, I believe, undue busyness. God was never absent, but often ignored, and I did a lot of forgetting in those years, especially as the children grew older.

Thus it came about that at 51 I confronted a happening of the magnitude of a conversion experience. All the things associated with the lessening of intensity of family responsibility led to the point of realizing in a blinding flash how I had "lived forgetting."

A conversion experience is never as sudden as it seems. It is always preceded by a period of mounting inner tension. For me the immediately preceding years had involved returning to the university for a Ph.D. in sociology, moving from the community in the Midwest where the children had grown up to a university nestled at the foot of the Rocky Mountains, and trading the emptying nest at home for a professorship at the university. From rearing children to

teaching college students, from community action to research on the dynamics of peacemaking, from the up and down spiritual life of one Quaker Meeting to the up and down spiritual life of another Quaker Meeting — where was all this going?

In spite of the sense of an unnamed catastrophe occasioned by America's continuing presence in Vietnam, activities went on much as usual in the suburban middle class world I lived in. We tidied and cleaned our much too roomy and overfurnished houses, cooked unnecessary quantities of food, moved in our daily round quite protected from suffering of every kind except the peculiar dull ache of affluence.

“Part I” of my upside-down turning, and the beginning of another remembering, came in India in January of 1971. After chairing a Congress of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom I gratefully accepted the invitation of the director of the Gandhi Museum to stay with him and his hospitable wife. In the very modest unheated apartment of my friends, who chose voluntarily to live at a level of simplicity considerably more austere than that of most Indians of “their class,” I discovered the human condition through the very ordinary experience of being terribly cold day after day! It was January, temperatures went below freezing every night, and each morning I would read in the paper about the number of Indians who had frozen to death the night before in the streets. What a small amount of extra food, clothing, shelter and warmth would have kept them alive! I drew my own coat tightly about me in the evenings as the damp fog rolled into the apartment from the river, and thought of all the extra shelter and warmth spread in wanton abundance across suburbia, USA.

All the usual distances between me and physical deprivation were erased. A school was to be built at the top of the hill to one side of the house I was living in. Three migrant construction worker families lived there in brush

shelters. I saw the meager bowls of rice that were cooked for the evening meal. In the morning I saw the men swing mattocks into the steep hillside to loosen stones which the women, babies on their backs, carried up the hill on their heads to crush for building materials. Small children of unguessable ages climbed up the hill with smaller stones, occasionally stopping to play. The men sometimes sang; the women and children sometimes smiled. For a few days I lived a triple life: part of me was back in our suburban home in Colorado; part of me was shivering in my friends' apartment; and part of me was next door living in a brush shelter and cooking meager rations over an open fire.

By day I sat in the Gandhi library reading the writings that had poured from Gandhi's pen in his life. As I read his passionate words about sarvodaya (welfare) — and not wanting what the least of his brothers and sisters could not have — I knew that these were my brothers and sisters too, and that I also could not want what they could not have. I wrote long letters home about stripping ourselves of what we did not need.

Readiness for stripping — or shall I say a “call” to strip — is a very individual and personal thing, however. Coming home to my family I found that words could convey neither outward experience nor inward state to Kenneth and most of the children. The two of the five children who were already called to this were finding their own ways of expressing it. For the rest it was simply unreal.

And so I lived in suburbia again. All around me were well-intentioned, socially conscious people, supporting good causes. At Friends Meeting on Sunday mornings I would sit in the silence with all these good people, listen to their words of kindly mutual encouragement and often poetic insight, and return as they did to the domestic comforts that sealed us all off from the living God.

Part II of the remembering involved in my “conversion” came a few months later when a teenager came briefly to

stay with us who had been badly damaged by drug trips and was going through a major emotional crisis. He had been one of the flower children, one of the gentlest of them. Conscious of nothing but his desire to give and receive love and to hurt no one, he was in deepest inward agony.

Watching his suffering, knowing that in a certain way I was as trapped and helpless as he, I suddenly one night saw myself as a small frog in the bottom of a deep well, leaping/leaping to get up and over the side. All my life I had been leaping. I knew where the sun was, I knew which way to jump, I knew there was an outside — another place to be. Yet I kept falling back into the bottom of the well.

We have all heard that a drowning person sees her life unreeling past the inward eye in her final moments. In just that manner, and in just a few moments of time, did my own life unreel before me. This was a kind of death — the death of that old try-hard frog, the birth of a new creature who found her way over the top of the well and into a new world. In that moment of leap, I felt as if I were living not only my own past life through, but that of all people who had ever lived — all my brothers and sisters on the planet. I saw how we all had chained ourselves to daily rhythms that were bound to defeat us. Day after day we recapitulated the old cycle of effort, irritation, impatience and anger — softened by small epiphanies of love and remorse. The spirit had to break through from time to time, because spirit is our very nature, but how tiny the eruptions, how heavy-handed our daily behavior. For how many millennia had this gone on? Was the human race never to discover its self-forged chains?

The snapping of my chains was my signal that the human race was indeed to be freed — in theological language — from the bondage of sin and death. My experience is one of the simplest and oldest religious experiences that come to humans, nonetheless transforming for its commonness. Was the leap an act of the will or an invasion of grace? At

such times, grace informs our will. God does not carry us as so much baggage. The tension of the preceding years uncoiled like a giant spring in the crouched figure at the bottom of the well. It was met by God's grace, and I sprang up, free.

Knowing I was a "newborn," I felt I must learn to do everything anew. The shell of the old me was still there, and represented a real danger. I had 51 years' worth of old habits, trained responses, ways of thinking and doing, that could pull me back into the well. I tried to pray continuously, and to put my hand metaphorically in God's, so that I would not walk "on my own." Over and over as I walked about the campus and carried on my work I would whisper phrases like:

God, be in my feet and in my walking.
God, be in my hands and in my touching.
God, be in my eyes and in my seeing.
God, be in my ears and in my hearing.
God, be in my mind and in my thinking.
God, be in my heart and in my loving.

I tried not to do anything I could not put God into, in that way.

It is hard to teach when you are a newborn! It is not a time for lecturing. I did the best I could, and tried to share other dimensions of the teaching-learning process than the cognitive. Fasting for five days shortly after I came up out of the well helped me stay centered. It made me a bit shaky physically while carrying out my rather heavy daily routine, but that was part of the newbornness.

Early morning rising and prayer before the household stirred also helped me stay centered. Needing the love and support of those around me who could not relate to what was happening kept me humble, and grateful for the love that can hold a family together even in the absence of full understanding. I shared what was happening with Kenneth. He had gone through his major spiritual upheaval long ago, and felt at peace. But he has never failed to let me know

that he was standing by. Increased sensitivity to others who were in an intense state of seeking brought new fellowship in unexpected places.

At this time I felt both very distant from and very close to the Society of Friends. Distant from the Friends immediately around me with whom I could find no way to share what was happening within, but very close to the “Quaker saints” that had been part of my religious formation in the early years of my life in the Society. I was keenly aware that both Fox and Woolman had come through experiences like mine, and I found much support in that.

The historical “communion of saints” became very real to me as I found help in many quarters. First came Joachim de Fiore, whose concept of the new Age of the Holy Spirit as described in Marjorie Reeves’ *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages* started my thinking about the very possibility of a new human condition. Then there were two writers who gave me a most vivid understanding of the incredible process of *remaking, reforming* the human material: Evelyn Underhill and, oddly, the anthropologist, Victor Turner. The way in which Underhill patiently traced out the lineaments of the mystical experience in her masterful work, *Mysticism*, and analyzed the efforts and the disciplines which went into the tearing apart and reforming of those touched in this way by God, made the unbelievable believable. Turner, who wrote *The Ritual Process: Structure and Antistructure* in a totally different context, describes the function of *liminality*, as a rendering of the ordinary social being into *prima materia* which can then be molded anew. This is the function of the ritual process, which was the focus of his study. Again, the unbelievable became believable.

The saints themselves (though Evelyn Underhill was surely a saint too) helped in other ways, by writing of their own experiences. I felt that my own love of God was shallow compared with Teresa of Avila, and St. John of the Cross. And as I read *The Heretics*, Walter Nigg’s book on saints, heretics, and warriors for God, and explored the writings of the God-intoxicated women and men of the Middle Ages, I

found a very different set of role models than those sociologists usually write about. I realized that at one point in the Middle Ages it really had seemed as if the Age of the Holy Spirit were dawning. The intellectual and spiritual energy unleashed by that perception makes the spiritual explorations of the twentieth century seem relatively tame by comparison. But something went wrong. It petered out in famines, plagues, crusades and witch hunts.

The petering out preyed on my mind. Social Darwinism and the easy optimism of the age of science at the dawn of our century seemed to me to be equally out of touch with the grimness of history and with the underlying evolutionary possibilities of humanity. Teilhard de Chardin (whose work I had long loved but only now understood) was the one prophet of our age who saw, like Joachim, through the grimness and to the coming divinization of the world. The possibility of rebirth was still a live possibility for the human race. How then was the petering out to be prevented?

It seemed to be my task to explore that question, and I did not know how to go about it. What did God now require of me? I had not been brought up out of the well “for nothing.” Was I to lay aside the still-new role of college teacher and live a life of prayer? Since it seemed to me that most of the people around me simply weren’t serious about life, did not recognize that they walked on holy ground, breathed the breath of God, and moved toward a far-off divine end, I feared that I too could not remain serious if I went on doing the things I had been doing. Particularly I questioned the use of the intellect. Was it not precisely the constructs of the human intellect that so effectively shut us out from the experience of God’s immanence in the created world?

For one whole summer I sat before my desk, work spread out before me, and cried. God gave me no ease. There was no, “There, there, it will be all right.” It wasn’t all right, and I had to struggle through. Eckhardt’s austere teachings comforted me. The directed will was my responsibility. This

I understood. How grace could work on my directed will I did not understand. “Why don’t you let God be God in you?” asked Meister Eckhardt. If only I could!

It was only at the end of that summer that I came to the gradual comprehension that God is always at work in us even though there are times when we are too numbed by pain to realize it. The gradual lessening of the paralyzing conflict that made me unable to work, and also unable to find ease through prayer, was certainly helped by the reading of Jean LeClercq’s *Love of Learning and the Desire for God*. Once I realized that monks also had to face conflicts between scholarship and prayer, that choosing a “life of prayer” did not avoid that conflict since the church too had need of scholarship, I got some perspective on my struggle. The intellect was also part of God’s creation and could, like anything else, be used or misused.

By fall I had a certain feeling of resignation about the difficulty of the path before me. In spite of a loving family and loving friends, the aloneness was hard to bear, however. One of the ways I had tried earlier to deal with my concern about our excessive affluence was to try to interest congenial people in a type of community living which would involve sharing things in common to reduce individual possessions and expenditures. Such a community was, of course, to involve more than simple living. It was to affirm a different conception of humanness, and of society. Many communities have been founded with similar intentions in recent years, including one directly related to my own efforts. There is certainly a social readiness for this.

The old question of individual readiness however became once more a barrier. Just as my own need for community was lessening through my learning to let God be God in me, I most unexpectedly found a community of the spirit which allowed other ideas of community to recede to the back of my mind. Friends at the Newman Center found a small Benedictine monastery at Cold Spring on the Hudson

that was willing to receive a woman guest for two days.

I had never been in a monastery, and only occasionally had attended Mass, though always with great spiritual benefit. The words of the Mass and the silence of the Quaker Meeting had always seemed to me to point to the same deep place. After a long day's conferencing in the city I boarded the Poughkeepsie local with an excitement I did not myself understand. As the train bumped its way along the river at dusk, I kept repeating "Here I am, Lord. Here I am!" Brother Victor and a postulant, Brother Patrick, were waiting for me at the station. To my joyful eye they were two radiant archangels. They had waited with Vespers till my coming. In the candlelit chapel in the farmhouse monastery on a cold October evening I sang Vespers with the Brothers, following music and words totally unfamiliar to me, yet carried on wings of prayer to a full participation in the songs of evening praise.

I can find no words to express what it meant to be plunged from the austere silence of the Quaker Meeting with its abstention from all outward signs and symbols into the exultant joy of Catholic liturgical celebration. The frog that had jumped out of the well had been sitting pretty forlornly nearby ever since, wondering what to do with new life in a new place. No longer! A great flood of love was released by the singing of the liturgy, and renewal surged through my being.

"Too late have I known thee, beauty ever old and ever new, too late have I loved thee" sang St. Augustine. But not too late. Never too late!

For me the rhythm of monastic life was the long sought, long-lost rhythm of my own deepest inner spaces. I loved the pre-dawn matins, the quiet hour on my knees before lauds, the going downstairs to a simple breakfast of coffee and a slice of bread after a three hour vigil of waiting, listening, singing, praying. I loved the quiet reading time in the morning, feasting on books from the monastery library.

After noon prayers in the chapel, readings from *The Art of Prayer* during lunch; chores, walking, more reading in the afternoon. What an incredible grace the rule of silence is! Vespers, spiritual conversation during and after supper, Compline, and then a long time on my knees alone in the dark chapel in utter thankfulness for the leading that brought me here.

During one such prayer time in the chapel, I meditated for a long time on the cross before me; Christ's outline could but dimly be seen by the one flickering candle in the room. Entered into my journal that night:

Jesus, I am one of your kind! You are what we are to become.

Yet that sense of kind comes with a sharp sense of infinite distance, infinite unworthiness. I, scarcely a speck of dust in the world you illuminate. I, of *your* kind?

Unbearable stretching of spirit — torn upwards, rooted below.

Was that your crucifixion?

When the Brothers took me back to the station two days later, Brother Victor gave me a copy of the singing version of the Psalms used in his chapel, with a weekly rotation of Psalms written out for Lauds and Vespers, and the pattern for Compline. I have used them ever since. I needed a frame to grow on, and this met my need.

I have been back to the Monastery many times since that October weekend. There is a small community of us who gather there: two Sisters of other orders who love the contemplative life, the Brothers and myself. We are all pacifists, and some of us have been very active in the peace movement. Our spiritual bond is very strong and we *feel* like a community, even though we will never live physically in the same community.

The love of God is an extraordinary bond in today's

world. While my relationship to Our Lady of the Resurrection Monastery is a very special one, I have also come to find community with the very tender Catholics, including a Franciscan Sister who works particularly with the student community at the university; also with some of the Sisters of Loretto, whose life of service in love affirms the reality that so much around me denies; and with the Brothers of the Christ in the Desert Monastery, who live a life of radiance in the harsh beauty of the desert.

It is in the very nature of this bond of love to want to include others in it. Since I couldn't carry my family and my Meeting community into this experience of fellowship in the Catholic community, I longed to bridge the gap between the monastery and the home — and I found a way. Brother Victor happens to be an especially fine cook, owing to years of kitchen duty in the very poor monastery in Avila, Spain, where he took his vows. He learned there to make tasty meals out of unpromising scraps. One day when we were all sitting in the monastery kitchen preparing the evening meal I suddenly burst out (violating the silence, I fear!) “We should write down all Brother Victor's recipes and make a cookbook: Call it *From a Monastery Kitchen*.”

Of course, *From a Monastery Kitchen* was intended to be, and is, much more than a cookbook. In working it out we have all thought a great deal about what of monastic life can be shared in families. Each of us has written our own understandings of that sharing. We chose as the theme of the cookbook the Christian Year of Grace. For me it has provided opportunity for much reflection on the meaning of seasons, cycles and celebrations in relation to our personal lives, the life of the church, and the life of the secular society. There is so much food for the nurture of our spiritual lives in the seasons of the church year, and yet the outer garments of celebration when taken over by the secular society prevent recognition of the underlying spiritual reality. The experience of advent and birth, of penitence, death and rebirth, and

the great explosion of Pentecostal joy, are closed to many Christians, and closed indeed to those who live entirely outside any church. How can the experience be re-awakened without contributing to an artificial reconstruction of past customs that leaves out the living core?

In my own religious tradition of Quakerism the fear of participating in artificial reconstructions led to a witness against all sacraments and all celebrations. We were to live every moment as a sacramental moment, every day as a celebration. What has happened, of course, is that we have lost the sense of the sacramental and have forgotten how to celebrate. Yet the Quaker testimony points to a real problem. The inward cycles of our souls do not correspond to the great cycles of the church. When the church rejoices we may be personally sad, and when the church wears the garments of penitence we may be bursting with inward joy. Learning to let the personal and the public cycles nourish and complement each other is a crucial part of growing up. There is much learning for children and adults alike in the study and celebration of the feasts of the church in the light of the variable human conditions. Children who learn about these things in their religious community are lucky indeed.

It has seemed to me a very special affirmation of my continuing sense of community, both with the Quaker and the Catholic faith, to work on a book for families at this time of my life — the empty nest years. The more so because my own calling has increasingly been toward solitude. During my summer of intense spiritual struggle I began to plan, with the help of a young seeker friend, what was to be a hermitage — a place of retreat. A simple one-room cabin in the woods up behind our family cabin in the Rockies' foothills not far from Boulder. Since we had to carry all building materials up the hill through the woods this could never have been without the help of my young friend and his builder brother. It was built with a great deal of love, because they entered fully into the spirit of what the cabin was to represent.

So gently, so slowly was I led toward thee, Lord! How could I know what that cabin was to mean?

The hermitage was ready on Thanksgiving day. I came up that weekend to the first solitude I had ever known in my life. I was fearful. I could not imagine what it would be like to be alone, having been surrounded by people all my life, and having needed to be needed all my life. It was very soon after my first visit to Our Lady of the Resurrection Monastery, and I carried the Hours of Office with me.

I am sitting in the hermitage now, writing by the setting sun. It has a window wall framing the mountains, and a tiny prayer closet at the back. It was an intuition of my young friend that even a one-room cabin should have a special place of retirement for prayer. There is electric light and heat, but no water. I go down the hill to the stream for water, and to the privy for a bathroom. I sleep on the floor, cook on a hot plate.

That very first day that I climbed the steps and entered here alone, uncertainty fell away and joy rushed in. On my knees in prayer, a lifetime of longing was being fulfilled. I was no longer the frog uncertainly perched at the brink of the well, or even the grateful frog warbling away in the monastery chapel. I was me, Elise, God's child, at home. In the intervening year and a half I have never entered this hermitage without being reached out to as I open the door. The hill from the road is a steep one. It seems as if every tree and brush and stone on the way reach out to help me in my climbing. I feel lifted. And when here, I feel enfolded in grace. God greets me here.

My initial rhythm of spending two days a week here was rudely interrupted by ear surgery which disturbed my balance canals and left me wildly gyrating in space for a few days. What an extraordinary experience to have no fixed points of reference in the outside world! On being wheeled into surgery I had sung "Into thy hands O Lord I commend my spirit," and the Lord did indeed hold me when nothing or no one else could.

Catholic communion was brought me at my request by that good shepherd of souls for many decades at St. Thomas Aquinas chapel who had also become my good friend and spiritual guide. This was a great act of love and faith on his part, since I was not a professed Catholic. Having felt the Presence so totally in the eucharist at the monastery, I felt the need very acutely in this crisis of the anchoring in Christ which communion gives.

Each of the very few times I have partaken of Catholic communion stands out brightly in my memory as a time of meeting, of union, of outpouring of grace. In the St. Thomas Aquinas chapel in Boulder, in the monastery chapel up the Hudson, in the beautiful sandstone-and-glass chapel at the Christ in the Desert Monastery in New Mexico (where Christ himself might be, if he were living again among us in human form), in the chapel of the Sisters of Loretto in the rolling hills of Kentucky, I have known the joy of oneness with all creation. The spiritual life of non-communing churches sometimes seems arid by contrast. Here is the height of incarnational awareness within the bonds of human fellowship. How can it but transform the lame and limping social institutions we create out of our own frenetic activity?

After experiencing communion in this transforming way I expected to be inwardly called to profess Catholicism. But God confounds our expectations, and I have learned that my obedience consists in remaining a Quaker. I was sad when I realized that this meant that I should no longer continue to partake of communion, except within the spiritual community I am closest to. How comforting then to read in Tauler, writing on communion in *Spiritual Conferences* (p. 270), that there are those who receive “not sacramentally but only spiritually, good people, pure in heart, who long for the Blessed Sacrament but cannot go to Communion at that time. These latter, in the measure of their desire and good dispositions, may even receive the grace of Communion more than those who receive sacramentally.”

I certainly do not covet *more* grace than those who receive the sacrament, but I am glad God does not leave me out.

The whole matter of my continuing relationship with the Society of Friends, and of my right responsibilities professionally and in the community, came into focus in a very beautiful way during my reading just before my hospitalization, of Adolphe Tanquerey's *The Spiritual Life*, the old guide to spiritual training for monastics. Tanquerey writes a good deal about the duties of state. Given one's situation in life and the responsibilities one has already accepted, and the talents one has, there are certain things one must do and other things one may not be able to do. My duties of state include my family, the human community, the Society of Friends, peace research, and students. That sets up a fair number of constraints!

Lying in the hospital I knew that if I was ever able to function well enough to climb to the hermitage again, I would need a year of reflection and retreat to work through all that was coming to me, to find patterns and priorities. Surgery had left me with a permanent condition of loud noises continually roaring in my head and, in consequence, a somewhat lowered energy level. Though I longed — and still long — for the complete physical silence I will never know again, I saw in my condition a blessing indeed, an aid to that simplification of life which kept eluding me. All my previous efforts to reduce activities and responsibilities had merely slowed my pace to a fast trot. If there was ever to be a reintegration of my life around my new understandings, it would take nothing less drastic than a year of solitude for this to happen. The sharp break with the past that my physical condition created gave me the courage to apply for the necessary leave. It was granted, and this essay is written after my first two months at the hermitage.

My year really began on Christmas day, though I was not able to come up here to stay for another five weeks. The psalm for Tuesday's vespers which I read that day opened the door:

O Lord, my heart is not proud nor haughty my eyes.

I have not gone after things too great nor marvels beyond me.

Truly I have set my soul in silence and peace.

A weaned child on its mother's breast, even so is my soul.

O Israel, hope in the Lord both now and forever.

Staying clear in my purposes, which involves not setting goals only because they're satisfying and recognizable to others, has required a great deal of effort in the past two months. I do not want to go after things too great, nor marvels beyond me. But the world is excitable, and the pressures from others to come down from the mountaintop with a vision, or at the least with a set of clay tablets, are stronger than I would have believed.

Not only do I have to struggle against the expectations of others, I have had to face my own expectations. There is no doubt about it, I had fallen into a way of thinking about the spiritual life which involved hitting upon some special set of practices which would be a sure recipe for holiness. By mid-March I wrote in my journal: "An underlying, slow growing realization for me in recent days is that there is no Way, no magic Key that will Open the Door."

That which we are born remembering, then, is not a "how to." It is God as presence. All of prayer, all of meditation, seeks that from which we came, that toward which we move:

Thought not to be formed

Vision not to be seen

Word not to be heard

Love not to be known

God beyond calling

Be thou my God.

The wisdom of solitude is not easy to translate into the world. If we arrive in the midst of the old busy scene with all our being open and vulnerable, we can easily be destroyed. There is a way — and it is my task this year to learn it — to be present both to God and to the world, and yet stay shielded.

Learning to live in this new rhythm has involved my entire family and my working associates. Kenneth has become an increasingly skilled househusband in best 20th century liberation style! On Sundays I come to Meeting, and go back to town with Kenneth to spend the day at home there. From time to time members of the family come up to the family cabin. Periodically I stop at the office to discuss work with my associate, administrative assistant and friend, Dorothy Carson, who by managing my contacts “with the world” has more than any other human being except my own family contributed to making my new way of life possible.

A spiritual revolutionary has a hard time in our society. The structures of violence and habits of oppression must be destroyed, but by means that we do not yet understand very well. We have only begun to explore the tools of non-violence and behavioral expressions of love (beyond sex!). It is clear that sociological training can be directed to the exploration of those tools, but in what settings can one do such work today? If much of my work in the future is done from the hermitage, that will not be a denial of society, but an affirmation of what it can become.

Solitude is the most beautiful condition of the human spirit. I understand now what St. Augustine really meant when he said, “Every time I go out among men I return less a man.” He was trying to say that in solitude he understood humanness, but easily lost track of it when confronted with his fellow specimens of humanity. I love humans now as I never loved them before when I depended on them daily. It is in solitude that I am learning to truly remember what I have lived forgetting. I hope to learn how to weave the golden

threads of solitude into the warp and woof of family and community living. I know of no other way for us to become what we are created to be.

Solitude I sing for you
 Solitude I pray for you,
 Solitude I do for you.

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