Remembering Elise Boulding: The Legacy of Her Journaling

Mary Lee Morrison December 1, 2011

Elise Boulding died on June 24, 2010, in Needham, Mass., just shy of her 90th birthday. Known for her accomplishments in many areas, she was a scholar, teacher, author, activist, mother, and long-time member of the Religious Society of Friends. She was a leader in founding three important fields of academic inquiry: women’s, peace, and futures studies. Her life spoke to the integration of peace research, education and action. Elise left a lasting legacy in her many writings, including over 300 publications: scholarly books and chapters, poetry, speeches, letters and several Pendle Hill Pamphlets. Elise kept a journal, beginning in her early adolescence and continuing until shortly before her death. Excerpts from these entries illuminate the deep spiritual struggles and triumphs that she experienced throughout her life.

I began my friendship with Elise Boulding during the last fifteen years of her life through researching and writing a full length biography of her, a published revision of my doctoral research in educational studies with a focus on peace studies. I was blessed with periods of extended conversations with her over the course of several years of the research. During this time Elise opened her journals and private papers to me. I am grateful to the surviving Boulding children and especially to Russell Boulding for his permission to use and to quote from this material.

Brief Biographical Overview

Elise Boulding was born in Oslo, Norway in 1920 and immigrated to the United States as a three-year-old with her parents, Birgit (Johnsen) and Joseph Biörn-Hansen. Sociologist emeritus from the University of Colorado and Dartmouth College, she is often considered the matriarch of the 20th century peace research movement. Her writings on women, on the importance of the family in creating a more peaceful world, on the power of visioning for a

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more peaceful future, and on the role of linking local and regional organizations to create a more interdependent global planet are considered seminal. A consummate networker and world traveler, particularly in her middle and later years as her academic career expanded, she saw herself first and foremost as an educator, as a global citizen, and as a mother, with her roots grounded in her family and in her community, though her international reputation was considerable.

Elise Boulding's long marriage and fruitful partnership with Quaker economist Kenneth Boulding, including some of the conflicts that she experienced in their relationship, helped to contribute to the development of her ideas on cultures of peace for which she was best known during the latter years of her life. Calling herself a homemaker for the first eighteen years of her marriage, she was an activist and a peace educator before she became a more formal academic scholar in her mid-forties. These early involvements included rising to become International Chair of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom in 1967 and work with American Friends Service Committee, which lasted for many years.

Grounded in the Religious Society of Friends during her adult years, Elise's spiritual journey encompassed ecumenism. Finding Friends during college and marrying Kenneth Boulding in 1941, he who was already a well-known Quaker economist and poet, were epiphanies for Elise, helping to solidify her spiritual seeking and laying the grounding for her future life and work. Elise's faith journey began as a Norwegian immigrant who was born into a nominally Lutheran family, and as a young girl she sought out a local Protestant church. An early journal entry notes that for one day during adolescence she became a Christian Scientist, quickly deciding that was not the spiritual path for her. At that time she wrote in her journal that she would make her own religion.

Joining Quakers at age 21, she quickly became a well-known member of the Religious Society of Friends. Prior to the birth of the first of their five children, Elise and Kenneth were members of Princeton (N.J.) and Nashville (Tenn.) Friends Meetings. Russell, their oldest child, was born in 1947 and they were members of Ames (Iowa) Meeting at that time. Four more children followed in quick succession: Mark, Christine, Philip and William. The family was active in the Ann Arbor (Mich.) and Boulder (Colo.) Friends Meetings, having relocated to Michigan in the early 1950s for Kenneth to take a faculty position in economics at the university. In 1967 they settled in Boulder where both Kenneth and Elise took positions at the University of Colorado. In addition Elise worshiped with Hanover, N.H., Friends during her time teaching at Dartmouth College in the 1970s and 1980s, later becoming a member of Wellesley (Mass.) Meeting when she moved to the Boston area in 1996. In her middle and later years Elise sought out Catholic monasteries and worshiped and worked with Buddhists,
and as her interest in ecumenism grew, she represented Quakers at the international gatherings of the Interfaith Peace Council in the 1990s.

**Periods of Retreat**

Despite her exuberance for life, Elise struggled with dark periods throughout her life. The price of her over-extension was times of exhaustion, both physical and emotional. At these times she would retreat into journal writing, into visits to Catholic monasteries, and once to a year’s solitude in a little cabin she’d had built for her in the Colorado mountainside where her first full length scholarly book was written. This was a history of the world’s women, *The Underside of History: A View of Women Through Time* (1976). The legacy of many of these times of darkness came to fruition in her spiritual memoir “Born Remembering”, published both as Pendle Hill Pamphlet 200 (1975) and in her fulllength book on families, *One Small Plot of Heaven: Reflections on Family Life by a Quaker Sociologist*, published in 1989 by Pendle Hill.

**Journal Entries**

In 1973 Elise jotted in her journal that she had had a good talk with Quaker scholar Douglas Steere, who had come to lecture at the monastery where she was on retreat. It was during this period of time that she was wrestling with her commitment to stay with the Religious Society of Friends.

> He has come to the same view of Quakerism that I have, that it has lost its sacramental quality through almost complete secularization of membership and non attention to scriptural experience, but he comes to the opposite conclusion about what to do about it. Instead of leaving the Society he would stay and try to bring it alive spiritually again. He reminded me that Quakerism was a social-religious mutation which the world would be poorer to lose. That was a good thing to remind me of, perhaps the one most effective thing he could have said.

**A Year of Solitude**

An entry from one of her first journal entries when she came to her Colorado hermitage for her year of solitude in January of 1974 notes the importance of letting go of some expectations: “I think that I have known all along that the thing that mustn’t happen is that I develop a compulsion about ‘something to show’ for this year.”

This year of solitude was important to Elise in several ways. She had recently suffered from some physical illnesses which involved dizziness and inner ear complications as well as
surgery for breast cancer. Her children were nearly grown, and her active roles in parenting were waning. Her scholarly career was increasingly demanding. She was a frequent speaker at Quaker gatherings, sometimes alone and sometimes with Kenneth. Philosophical differences on several key issues between Kenneth and Elise during their decades-long partnership created increasing stress for Elise. It was after a period of several years of the couple living and working apart, beginning with Kenneth’s retirement from the University of Colorado in the 1970s (she living in New Hampshire for a faculty position at Dartmouth and he staying in their home in Boulder), that the couple had a wonderful coming together in the last years of their marriage, through what Elise gratefully referred to as "Grace." This was the fruit of their more than fifty years together. Kenneth died in 1993.

Other journal entries of Elise’s from 1974 include several of the phrases for which she is known concerning the spirit of love:

“If the human race brings itself to a premature conclusion it will be because we failed to learn the dynamics of love. Love isn’t intellectually respectable. If it were, we wouldn’t have the problems we do. It is because I love people that I love solitude. It is never too late to bring love into any relationship. I realize how much depends on the capacity for spontaneous loving and giving, how easy it is for all of us to be captured by our own sense of mission and forget whose mission we are on and that love must be the underlying motion of every act or the act is self-neutralizing. It comes from god."

In 1976, a journal entry relates to her having begun her scholarly exploration into futures studies:

“My calling lies in exploring the human condition in the context of much greater time spans that I am now dealing with."

In a few years her theories on visioning and on the “200 Year Present” would culminate in the publication of her seminal book on global education, Building a Global Civic Culture: Education for an Interdependent World (1988).

**A Seminal Dream**

In 1978 the Bouldings’ youngest son, William, was married. This event marked the end, to Elise, of her child rearing days. This was also the time at which she accepted a permanent
faculty position at Dartmouth. At the time of the wedding, a dream came to Elise, revealed in the following verse, a trajectory for the rest of her life:

“9 years teaching
9 years thru practice preaching
9 years heavenward reaching

She was told in the dream that she was to continue her academic teaching for nine more years. She would then spend nine years in "preaching," meaning her focus would be spiritual. Elise believed that the final nine years of her life would be "heaven-reaching," that is preparing for death. True to the spirit of her intentional living, this vision was, in many ways, carried out.

Elise retired from Dartmouth in 1985 and continued part time teaching for several more years after returning to Boulder. The years following retirement, after her "nine years of teaching," was her time of "preaching," although, of course, she had already had a long history of speaking and writing with the Religious Society of Friends and with other faith groups. During this time Elise was involved in many Quaker activities in her monthly and yearly meetings and helped to develop the Friends Peace Teams project, supporting the work of the African Great Lakes Initiative as well as helping to develop and implement the idea of local centers of peace in the United States.

A synthesis of Elise's ideas through decades of research, teaching, and writing culminated in her book *Cultures of Peace: The Hidden Side of History*, published in 2000. In her words, a culture of peace is a culture that promotes peaceable diversity, dealing creatively with the conflicts and differences that appear in every society, because no two human beings are alike.

In 2000, Elise moved to North Hill, a retirement home in Needham, Mass., near her daughter Christine's home outside of Boston. Her last years were to be "heavenward reaching." In actuality, she outlived her dream timeline, since she thought she would reach, and was preparing for, the end of her life in 2005. Elise continued her "practice preaching" well into the new millennium, despite some significant health issues. It was at the end of her life that she was able to fully find peace, to let go of some of the stresses and anxieties which contributed both to her periods of despair and to the rich legacy she left us of her teaching, writing and speaking. Her son, Russell, believes that it was Alzheimer's disease (with which she was diagnosed several years before her death) leading to her increasing cognitive decline, that finally enabled Elise to fully experience her "heavenward reaching," to let go of her high
selfexpectations, and to experience her final inner healing and the victory she had long sought: living in “the now” of God’s love.

April 2008

Wakened from an afternoon nap with a
Wellspring of Love arising in my heart!
What an incredible gift!
The branches of the trees blowing gently in the wind outside my window are pregnant
With buds getting ready to open up—but not yet!
But getting ready!
The Holy Spirit is blessing our Earth and all of us living creatures on it.
Thank you Holy Spirit!

In late May 2010, shortly before her death, Elise received one of her regular visits from Virginia Benson, Senior Research Fellow of the Ikeda Center for Peace, Learning and Dialogue, a Buddhist-inspired educational and dialogue center located in Cambridge, Mass. Elise enjoyed a fifteen-year relationship with the Ikeda Center (formerly known as the Boston Research Center for the Twenty-First Century), beginning shortly before her move to the New England in the mid-90s and continuing until her death. Her last book, Into Full Flower: Making Peace Cultures Happen, a series of dialogues with the center’s founder Daisaku Ikeda, was published in 2010. In the words of Ginny Benson: “Elise was talking to me as she lay there looking up at the trees in the wind. Her words sounded so poetic that I wrote them down verbatim and arranged them like a poem. Her expansive spirit joined the trees ‘dancing in the sky.’ This joyous ode is to the trees, to the ‘now’ and to her love of networking.”

Everything is in the now.
The trees and the sky
And you and I
We’re in the now!
See the wind dancing in the trees.
Or is it the trees dancing in the wind?
Trees can’t dance without the wind
The wind can’t dance without the trees.
We all need each other
And I need you
And you need me.
So happy
Near the end of Into Full Flower, Elise’s words speak to our future as humanity. "There is a spirit in each of us that will make it possible for us to learn to live together as a family on this planet. First we must learn to listen to that spirit and to one another." A memorial service was held for Elise Boulding on July 6, 2010, on what would have been her 90th birthday, in the chapel at Wellesley College under the care of Wellesley Friends Meeting.

Mary Lee Morrison, a member of Hartford (Conn.) Meeting, is a writer and educator, community activist and volunteer, with interests in peace and global sustainability and transformative pedagogy. She is the author of Elise Boulding: A Life in the Cause of Peace (2005). Further reading of the journals of Elise Boulding can be found at http://www.earthenergyhealing.org/EliseBoulding3.htm.

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