

Elise Boulding (pronounced BOWL-ding) (1920-2010) was a Quaker sociologist who was instrumental in establishing peace studies and conflict resolution as an academic discipline.

Elise was born in Oslo, Norway in 1920. Her family moved to the United States when she was three years old. Growing up, she came to know her native country through her mother's homesick tales, and she thought of it as a refuge untouched by the rest of the world's tragedies. Then Hitler's army invaded Norway in 1940. "And that was when I realized that there was no safe place on earth," she said. "And I knew that I had found my life's mission."

In her youth, she became active in anti-war activities and converted to Quakerism. It was at a Quaker meeting in May 1941 that she met her future husband, Kenneth Boulding (1910–1993), a respected English economist who would collaborate extensively with Elise on her peace work.

The Bouldings raised five children, with Elise serving as both homemaker and activist. Her experience as a mother convinced her that people can be taught to wage peace just as they are taught to wage war. Lessons learned around the dinner table and on school playgrounds inevitably mold a person's method of dealing with conflict, Dr. Boulding thought. She wrote about the importance of educating children to become diplomats instead of aggressors and also about finding ways to raise children "to be sufficiently alienated from society, so they won't accept things 'as they are.'"

She believed the family unit, and especially the role of women within that unit, was crucial to the global peace movement. In 1969, she earned a doctorate in Sociology at the University of Michigan. Later she chaired the Sociology Department at Dartmouth College and developed the nation's first Peace Studies program there.

Boulding held many leadership positions in peace and social justice related groups, from chairing the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) to creating the International Peace Research Association (IPRA) to work with the United Nations through UNESCO and the University of the United Nations. She is considered to be one of the most influential peace researchers and activists of the 20th century.

She also wrote several Pendle Hill pamphlets, including her spiritual autobiography, "Born Remembering."

"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 mountain lake; while curled up on the living room couch, leafing through the reproductions of Norwegian painting that were among the few treasures brought from our home in Norway."

1. What early memories do you have of the presence of something greater than you?

In 1971 (age 51) – "Part I of my upside-down turning and the beginning of another remembering, came in India. 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 street. What a small amount of extra food, clothing, shelter and warmth would have kept them alive...”

“By day I sat in the Gandhi library reading the writings that had poured from Gandhi’s pen. 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...

“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.”

2. How do you discern wants from needs? How do you balance meeting your needs with meeting the needs of your family and community?

“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 drugs and was going through a major emotional crisis...

“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... 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 on 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 thorough, 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 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.

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.’”

Also during this time Elise read about the saints and “explored the writings of the God-intoxicated women and men of the Middle Ages.”

“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... 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.

Elise spent time in prayer and solitude at a monastery to help clarify her journey. She also spent quiet time alone in a simple one-room cabin in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains.

“That which we are born remembering, ..., is not a ‘how-to.’ It is God as presence...

“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 ... to be present both to God and to the world, and yet stay shielded.

"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."

3. How do you balance time replenishing your spirit and time serving others?
4. Do you see conflict between the path of the intellect and the path of spiritual development?
5. How do you balance the need for solitude with the need for community?