

# Elisabeth Dearborn: Razing Barns

Sermon for Seekers Church

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Elisabeth Dearborn

## Razing Barns

### Luke 12:13-21

12:13 Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me."

12:14 But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?"

12:15 And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

12:16 Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly.

12:17 And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?'

12:18 Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.

12:19 And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'

12:20 But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?'

12:21 So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

I spent a long time with the rich man as I looked at this scripture: how I'd built big barns in my life getting things which might not look like material possessions, but which in

ways clogged my capacity to receive God's abundance. Three came to mind: getting my Ph.D. which meant cementing myself to my head, staying part of the Society of Friends after God had nudged me to move on, and being absolutely convinced about the kind of ministry my husband and I were called to. Those are three of the big barns in my life where my need to be right kept me from being open to the mystery unfolding in my life. Do you have those kinds of barns in your life? Will you share those stories with me?

Then, of course, in this scripture is written the line: "You fool, you could lose your life tonight." I was on an airplane two weeks ago traveling through a fairly long thunderstorm sitting in the thirty-eighth row. Half the plane threw up. I said to myself: the next time I choose a piece of scripture to work with I want to remember that I'm issuing an invitation to God to teach me a firsthand lesson. What do we hold onto in the face of death? Do I really want to be holding on then? How do I make letting go an everyday practice?

Finally, it occurred to me that I had actually gotten some barns down over the years and that I might have something to share with you from reflecting on that experience.

The Ph.D. barn came crashing down twenty-one years ago. I was about thirty. It was a bulldozer God creaming the carefully constructed life I had. The bulldozer helped me open up so that I wasn't living in my head so much. It created new ways of imagining my work, my life, the geography I lived in, what my values were. It was fundamental barn dismantling. The crash course was a broken back, a mental hospital and twenty months of silence living in a Quaker halfway house. A whole story in itself. Deep darkness. Falling into the hands of a living God, a landscape where my head couldn't help me much.

The nugget from that time is that I arose knowing something new: I was a child of God. I knew it in my bones. I wasn't failing my life, my body was never going to be able to

backpack again or dance, I thought; I was simply going somewhere else. I was thick skinned and apparently needed a bulldozer because nothing else got my attention. Does this sound familiar?

A song came out of the time that followed the darkness.  
It's called Sweet Waters:

*Sweet waters flowing over me  
Sweet waters gonna set me free  
Sweet waters flowing by my door  
Sweet waters who could ask for more?*

*You teach me how to move along  
Over rocks you flow  
You teach me to be steady  
Steady as you go*

The **second** barn came down with less force just a few years ago: leaving the Religious Society of Friends. Here's the background: I first found Quakers at fourteen. The Unitarian youth group were smokers. I wasn't interested in smoking. The Quakers were organizing a work project to bring in the almond crop of a man who was in jail for sailing into the atomic testing zone. So I left my Unitarian church with its focus on questioning authority and its sanctuary in the round with eight symbols of all the great religions. I began to be part of a Quaker community in California that had many people committed to social action – sitting in front of trains carrying atomic weapons, for instance. I became deeply committed over the next thirty-five years to these people. I was fed by our search for God in social action community and in the silence of worship. While there were signs that God was moving me along, I didn't listen to them, not after thirty-five years. Not really. I didn't believe them. Then, several years ago, at yearly meeting one morning, I burst into tears

realizing I didn't want to be there at all. So I went to the General Secretary who looked at me, hugged me, and said, "Go, Friend." I passed my responsibilities on to others and left two hours later.

Over the next several months I resigned from all Quaker work except the planning committee to create the first national gathering of Quaker Mystics. It was like white water this time, not like being bulldozed. My eyes were open, my head was up, and I was sizzling through rapid changes as I slipped out of a thirty-five-year-old skin. Some excitement, some grief, some fear. Surely, I said to God, as the whitewater kept coming, you can't also mean for me to give up this Mystics thing? But, internally, there was no rest, just rapids; so in the end, it went, too. I just tried to keep my balance. God was paddling.

My life as a minister among Friends had claimed me for a long time but my real father was, as it turned out, beginning to die in Seattle at just this time. He became the path for me. Here's a poem from then: Remembrance: Planting for my Father

*When the man at the nursery said of the various dogwoods he  
was steering us through,  
"Now this tree originated in California," we looked at one  
another,  
"That's the one."*

*"A stellar dogwood," he replied and described its pink  
blossoms and disease resistant qualities.  
Already I was gone:*

*The tree's in bud in Golden Gate Park  
on a foggy day. My father, age 11,  
is wheeling his homemade buggy down the hill  
of 32nd Avenue to ride it on the grass.  
Out of a nearby church St. Francis stumbles  
and raising high his hands*

*shouts out, "God, show me yourself."*

*The tree bursts into bloom.*

*My father never prayed and when God came into conversation he soon inserted in a gentlemanly way a few words about questioning authority.*

*He had a passion for free thinking.*

*"Life means blooming*

*where you're planted," he wrote to me once I'd moved east.*

*He underlined the message with his life.*

*White hair, failing eyes, passing eighty, my father went inward to where the bloom is fragrant beyond our telling and where the petals of the heart open to all seasons.*

*His last year testified.*

*Planted, blooming, and knowing where he was headed, no longer weary to the bone with work,*

*but scarred and pruned and cascading into the full beauty of himself,*

*my father went down into his dying like a tree turning into earth again.*

Letting go of my Quaker self was more conscious than letting go of previous selves had been. By now I had heard plenty of stories about the upside down turns in the lives of people of faith. My father would call to tell me about the loss of first one, and then another part of his body to a mysterious paralysis which, they told him, would come in time to his lungs and he would go to sleep and not wake up. My inner life and my prayer group were containers. Even though it was hair-raising, it wasn't bulldozing. It was a time that had the sweetness of living water in it, and I had Richard and Shoshanna with me. Here's a song I wrote for Shoshanna that came from that time:

*I love you in the morning  
I love you in the day  
I love you coming through my door most any way  
But now that you are growing up I see it's time to go  
I see that you have roots and wings and blessings  
to bestow... of your own special kind,  
You're not mine anymore. The door is open.*

The **third** big barn came down recently: my expectations about our marriage. Richard and I were led to this marriage at what they call mid-life: thirty-nine and forty-one. When he actually asked me to marry him, he said, "And I bought your wedding gown 14 years ago." "Look," I said back, "you didn't even know me fourteen years ago." I'll tell you the rest of the story sometime.

In the meeting for worship in the manner of Friends where we joined our lives twelve years ago – which several of you in this room attended – no less than six people had messages from the Spirit telling us we had a joint work to do outside of parenting. I was certain I knew what its form was at first – joint Quaker ministry – but it kept not happening. It was a place in my life when I look back on it now which I never put into prayer. I stubbornly thought I knew.

Last year my need to be right finally got jarred loose from its layers of childhood protection and, as Sonya said to me, "Now God can actually do something with you." Some of my righteousness melted off. I arrived at Seekers in December midway through that process not knowing how my relationship with Richard was going to transform but knowing that in the midst of such a question, I needed to be in community where God's word was celebrated.

I lay these three before you – the letting go of my ideas about our marriage, the letting go of my life as a Quaker minister, and the letting go of life in my head – because,

as each of these barns went, I noticed that God came into me more deeply. God doesn't live in barns. God lives in fields. Yet there is this intense desire to fence God in, to live in smallness, to resist God's invitation to bigness. I hope you will feel free to nudge me if you notice me building barns. My capacity to keep God small is like a resistant strain of bacteria.

Having explored the rich man in this Scripture, I came home from vacation on the plane ride (in which I wondered if I was literally going to lose my life) to see my actual house surrounded by scaffolding and being partially dismantled. Was this another firsthand lesson? It suddenly occurred to me that there was a teacher who did not have answers when somebody asked him to be a decision-maker. Instead, he had a story.

So, here is a story I have for you out of my life. My Unitarian childhood, fiercely arguing over Walden Pond at the dinner table and filled with a kind of pain which eventually put me in a mental hospital, also prepared me to question authority in any form, particularly in the Christian form. Christians were dupes. It was obvious. When I got to be a Quaker, I was more tolerant – not of myself, but at least of other people being Christians. My Quaker life opened to me the power of continuing revelation; it also left me free to discover whether or not to build a context for continuing revelation through the Bible. I, being a daughter of four generations of California ranchers and farmers, having spent the best part of my summers roaming the Sierra Nevadas, found God in the fields and the lakes and the mountains of the high country. I didn't find God much of any place else and I certainly wasn't going to look for God in Christianity. Until one day at yearly meeting in 1981 in California: a piece of Scripture leapt into me.

*Here I am, Lord, Send me.*

These words expressed what was deepest in my heart, words that I had never been able to find or imagine, words that meant I could get personal and friendly with God. I was thirty-five; I'd been a Quaker for more than twenty years by then; the mental hospital had ploughed up my internal ground. Here was a seed.

In the next few months, the Lord did send me – out of California, out of directing a shelter for battered women, out of my first spiritual home, and on to Pendle Hill, the Quaker hot house for spiritual development outside of Philly. Knowing that I was a child of God, I left behind the known, and leapt.

I'd been through the bulldozing a few years earlier and I was (I thought) only going for a ten week term. Several weeks into that first term – I ended up staying a whole year – at Pendle Hill, I was sitting in worship with my consultant, Parker Palmer, in a barn attic.

Jesus walked in and held out one hand to Parker and one hand out to me.

It took years to tell this story and then slowly to add to it the stories of the several dozen visions which followed: Jesus sitting down the bench from me in Meeting for Worship, Jesus laying hands on a speaker at yearly meeting, Jesus teaching in a meadow, Jesus pouring oil over the mother of a woman whose son had died of AIDS. One morning it was just the odor of hay, crisp and unmistakable in the Meeting room, which alerted me to being outside the stable in Bethlehem. Another time it was riding in a cart with a tow headed toddler, looking up and recognizing first Mary, then Joseph. Each time an unmistakable knowing coming into me like a tuning fork at the right note.

I was frightened, awed, amazed, changed. I wanted to understand the guidance and healing being given me. Each vision was accompanied by deep emotional work, often a sort of tidal wave of it; a new way of seeing would come and with it



the need to live into a new way of being. About 14 years ago I said to Marjory on retreat, "I think I'm supposed to work with my hands. "Yes" came the response from her. Daily discipline slowly growing into a self shaped around the prayer/seed "Here I am, Lord, send me."

I went to visit Conservative Quakers in North Carolina who are Biblically based, not so theologically diverse as liberal Friends. I was seeking clearness about my path and help to live in my Truth. Their affirmation was deep and loving. They told me of one other Friend like me, they said, who lived in Ohio. Maybe I should go to visit him. I never did.

Once, during those years, when I was sitting in meeting for Worship, I saw a pair of dusty and sandalled feet and began to quake. My eyes traveled up the unmistakably masculine calves until I came to the hem of the garment. There they rested and I shook with the fire of the Holy Spirit. I knew again that in the gut unmistakable knowing – that I was being given a message about my life. I work now with my hands as a bodyworker. Some call me a healer.

I still resist; I still move forward. I am learning to dance this dance because I know I could lose my soul tonight and I want, like my father, to go down into my dying like a tree turning into earth again. I hope you will help me. When I first came to Seekers on a Sunday in Advent, I'd been hearing about you for fifteen years – since when I came to work at Dayspring in the days that it was a truck farm and offered cheap tent housing, home grown food, community, hands on work for head and heart-weary souls, and offered a class in the School of Christian Living on Spiritual Gifts. Just last December when I finally got to the door here, I found my former dental hygienist preaching-

Preaching is hardly the right term – weaving together the gifts of many of you in this community in a kind of feast of the Spirit. I felt at home. When one of us became the bent

over woman in the center of the sanctuary, I felt more at home. In her gesture I felt the possibility that all of me – both the travels in the dark and the travels in the light – might come in time to live in this place. I hope you will be home for me and that, with your help, I will grow out of the barns of my life and into the fields of deepening love and faith.