

Elisabeth Dearborn: The Call to Move Chairs

Seekers Church

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Elisabeth Dearborn

The Call to Move Chairs

*I've been traveling on,
I've been traveling long
Going down freedom's road
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I have been wandering the border where the holy breaks into our lives with the following scripture passage as my navigational rudder. (Mark I).

A man with leprosy came and knelt in front of Jesus, asking to be healed.

"If you want to, you can make me well again," he said.

Moved with compassion, Jesus touched him. "I want to," he said,

"Be healed." Instantly the leprosy disappeared – the man was healed.

On New Year's Eve, I had a conversation with Mary Carol. She had been reading the book on which the horse whisperer was based. I had been reading Modoc, the true and lovely story of a lifelong relationship between an elephant and a man who understood elephant language. The horse whisperer was whipped with chains as a child. So, said Mary Carol, his gift grew in all that pain. These words opened a door in my heart. Later during the ritual sharing of objects to be burned in our New

Year's Eve bonfire, I said, "This mask I am burning represents the experience of being in a mental hospital and stands for all those things which separate me from saying yes to the invitation to be in community here."

Therefore, the leper in me was coming to meet the Jesus in all of you. Do you remember how that night when the mask was laid on the fire it rose up in many colors of flame?

As we have been moving as a community toward this decision on a new home, I have felt engaged and invited into the center. It has been a 90-day cooker, inside me and, I know, inside some of you, prompted by the outward movement of the community. Our willingness to be church at this time has been deeply healing for me. My leprosy never shows. Being an ex mental patient is not visible on the surface.

This scripture, particularly the lines "if you want to," the phrasing in which the leper speaks to Jesus, captured me. Here is a story about the dismantling of the ego. I hear this leper not demanding to be healed but giving over to the will of God, being in a place where the capital S Self can speak through the ego, a place of accepting suffering. The leper says, "If you want to," if it is the will of God, heal me, but otherwise, I am willing to stay in my leprosy. Jesus, recognizing this awareness in the leper, is in turn deeply moved and reaches out to touch him sincerely. In this meeting a great resonance occurs, the leper is healed, and his physical body is cured. The leprosy is gone.

This is quite a story. Jesus' healing is one of the great inbreakings of God into human history. What is it to be touched this way? What is it to be healed? How do we bring this to each other? How do we understand what happens in these stories? What sense do we make of the mysterious invitation to live on the borders of our own ability to heal, and to be healed?

The story goes on, "Moved with compassion." What is it to be "moved with compassion"? Where have you felt moved with compassion? Alternatively, were you so moved that you reached out to touch another? Where have you been touched this way?

Moved with compassion, Jesus touched the leper and said to him, "Be healed." Instantly the leprosy disappeared, the man was healed.

Now recently Jesse told me a story of speaking to a broken copy machine. "Be healed," he shouted at it in frustration. It whirred into life.

I work touching others and have for 12 years. The professional way I present myself is as a certified Rosen Method Bodywork Practitioner, a PhD clinical psychologist and a certified massage practitioner. These trainings and certificates are legitimate credentials. However, walking through all of them gave me an apprenticeship long and arduous enough, like Odysseus' ten year voyage, so that coming home I could see home for the first time. I am a seer and a healer.

I became a seer and a healer in two ways. One is that at age 14 I left my family church and began to live among the Society of Friends. I went to work camps with Ralph Bunche, then undersecretary of the UN; I was on committees with Barbara Graves who had overseen the Quaker program to feed a million hungry children in Germany after the war; I led singing with Joan Baez. It was an adolescence filled with community and the power of love in action. We had pencils that said, "Work is love made visible." The other way I grew up to be a seer and a healer was to have the family I did. It had little soul. My mother was spending her energy having affairs. As we reached adolescence, I watched one brother begin to play dangerously with race cars, then hang gliders, then finally die paragliding, having lived his whole adult life in a school bus with no running water or cooking facilities. I watched another brother go into a fetal position for 18 months, emerging

functional but remote. My sister, quite beautiful physically, manipulated men with sex. I am putting this fragile nest onto the altar in honor of this family. Into this broken circle came a moment in which my mother revealed to me that she had been lovers with my lover. It was 1977. I was in recovery from being physically paralyzed in a bicycling accident and her story, none of which I had known consciously before, was beyond my comprehension. It rendered me speechless for 20 months. I spent the first few weeks in an acute psychiatric ward.

I was learning to be a seer. I did not know that then. I was learning to let thoughts fall away and to stay with the feelings, a deep meditative practice. I did not know that either. What I did know was that I was learning to let the Spirit lead and the mind follow. I was not really saying, "If you want to heal me" to the Spirit. I was saying that I, a striver after intellectual insight, will now strive after spiritual insight. But striving after spiritual insight at least moved me into community where powerful healings occurred: Pendle Hill, retreats with Thich Nhat Hanh, the Kripalu yoga ashram, Meeting for Worship and the Quaker community, Dayspring, FAW events, Rosen training and work, my marriage.

Being delivered onto the spiritual path by Caesarean, as it were, split open to give birth to my soul, led me to the study of the physical body and to the mystery of spirit in flesh. In the first years of the journey, I was sustained by direct mystical experience, visions mostly of Jesus, but occasionally of the Buddha as well. Once I arrived in bodywork 12 years ago, the exhilarating and exhausting work of actually melting off the pain and beginning to arrive in my heart and my body began. Being more deeply able to love and be in the human community took hold. Here is that story in a poem

Planting Winterheart

*Winter is when the roots go down
And where the light is born.*

*It rained that winter all the time.
My heart wept constantly.
I had no time to flee.
All the gates of prayer flooded.*

*On the mountain where the air is crisp,
My feet, like angels on the ground of God,
Ground slowly into earth.
My roots went down.
Tendrils from my toes implanted in the rich, dark soil
Until they reached the rock.*

*Spring came. I was immobile.
Angels came and cried.
They beat their wings and sang and wept again.
I stood stock-still.
The earth crept up and overtook me.
In time my toes grew where my kneecaps used to be
And kneecaps into shoulders
And then
And then,
In a moment of great joy,
My heart burst into bloom.*

Written 1982, rewrite 1995

Elisabeth O Connor says the work we are called to accomplish something in the world but also completes something in us. It comes of being faithful to our deepest feelings and longings and to listening for the life that wants to be lived through us. If I am to be a healer, then so be it.

Betrayal set me in motion, put me into the deep waters of suffering. The lectionary this week has wonderful lines about the training of the spiritual athlete. Each step matters.

The New Year's ritual was the perfect next step for me – to name to all of you the place I find myself in relation to this community. I want to say yes, but there is in me that which holds me apart, both the source of my call and the suffering. As we did discernment circles, I found the image of all of you rising up inside me helping me to carry the suffering.

Doing hands on work completes something in me. Here are a few glimpses of what happens in my work –

- There is a man on the table with recurrent sciatica, lying on his stomach. My hands come into focus over his sacrum. Working between my hands, like holding a slinky, I wait for a deep sense of presence to come in through the center of my palms, like a force field of light connecting across this area of his body. I begin to see a boy, 10 or 12 years old, in an apple tree. It stays. Moreover, I feel in my hands a kind of easing come into him. I ask about the image very simply. He begins to tell me about Scouts, the way Scouting was the center of his childhood. His body eases as he talks, breath coming into his sacrum. The pain is less when he gets up. Some bridge exists between his body and spirit.
- A man with a dozen years of chronic fatigue is on my table. I feel into the deep core of his body, watching the flow of breath and physical tension, beginning to establish resonance, picking up in my own body the physical sensations that tell me where he is congested energetically. Over his solar plexus, a picture of an old woman in black comes into view. I ask him about a grandmother. He begins the story of sharing a room with her until he was 3 and she died...'
- There is a woman just a few weeks from dying. Months before, the tumors made her housebound; I begin to see

her at home, no longer doing anything I recognize as Rosen but laying hands on, listening to her body, helping her to listen. One day she says, "Elisabeth, I hear a wall of song." After she is dead, I find a sacred space in which to move. In a dance I pick up her frail body, the body I have worked on for 7 years through its cancer, and I carry it through the movement space to where I feel the veil between this life and the next. Whatever this rite is that we are in, I am completing our work together, carrying her body finally to the wall of song, laying it down, saying a final word of gratitude for our life together. Soft presences gently take her through the veil and away.

- My hands are on a woman whose first child was born with Downs's syndrome. She has the ability to drop down deeply into her womb where the loss has left her very spacious for God. As my hands and awareness accompany her, I become aware of an archangel at the other end of the table, doing the work with me. I hear that she is called to be a gatekeeper, to stand between the worlds, a guardian of the light.
- On the table is a woman who lives at a certain distance from her body. As I begin to work on her, I see another pair of hands extending beyond my own and I hear the voice of Jesus instructing me to stay where I am, that he will be working over her solar plexus.

The spiritual formation for my work as a healer came out of the Quaker tradition, out of repeatedly hearing the call in Meeting for Worship and testing it against ego's desire to speak. It comes from once having had a message in Meeting for Worship and not giving it and having a woman stand up beside me in meeting and say, "There is someone in this meeting who has a message who is not giving it. Will Thee be faithful?" The body of Christ, old Quakers say, is not a metaphor. It is a living climate, an organism in which we function. Those who minister are not separate; they are extensions of the one Life

and Power. They dwell together in a pool of divine presence, which blends all souls into unity. They are not required to be leaders all the time; they can sink back as needed into the nurture and unity of the body until they are again called clearly forth to stand for the Lord.

Any person dwelling in such a body is changed. Sometimes gradually, sometimes instantaneously, perceptions of the world and people widen. Life moves far beyond the simplification of outward affairs into a higher responsibility to Love. One of the outcomes can be a sensitizing of gifts for discernment or sensing of states. Repeatedly Quaker ministers, practicing surrender to the call to speak in meeting, learn the difference between having a sense of a person or a meeting's state and being told by the Light to speak. Corporate discernment is a practice that aids the whole community in deepening.

While much of my call was true as a Quaker minister, I could never rest among Friends. I believe I needed a community with a clearer archetype of healing in it. As we turn repeatedly to the stories of Jesus, and we look together at the way in which his own life was shaped by betrayal, I find this study very helpful. I left Friends and came in time here to Seekers where I am helped by all of you to hold the force of light and dark more closely together in me, where betrayal and blessing are in conversation.

As we made our lists at the discernment weekend about where the joy, the rightness, the sense of spirit had been directly felt in this community, wasn't it amazing? As we met to talk and listen and do ritual about this process of finding a new home, weren't the images rich? We spoke in depth, with great sensitivity to and with one another.

I remembered in the midst of it all a story about Thich Nhat Hanh and Thomas Merton meeting together in 1964. How, says Merton to Thich Nhat Hanh, did you learn to meditate? I went

to the monastery at l3, says TNH, but all I did was open doors and learn to serve tea.

I have come, I realize, to Seekers, to serve tea.

Alternatively, the Seekers equivalent come to move chairs.

Nevertheless, Glen once said to me, the whole story of this community is in the chairs.

For me it has been a blessing to be in the midst of ordinary souls loving one another, drawn particularly close during these 90 days of discernment. I hope we do not lose sight of the sense of being a community of the whole, which came to us during this time.

We gave each other gifts of love, generosity, tenderness, time, wisdom, leadership.

There is beauty in all that. Now we have the chance to pass that on.

It is through suffering that we are broken open and made available to call, to the life that wants to be lived through us. It is through community that we learn to hold the possibility of ourselves. As we head out the door for a new life, I trust that we will be given work worthy of our preparation. Amen.