

The Eloquence of Silence

Betty Clegg

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Biography of Betty Clegg

Elizabeth Gates Clegg has been active as a member and attender of Downers Grove Friends Meeting for over 20 years.

Born on the island of Maui, Hawaii, she grew up in semi-rural Connecticut, the oldest of six children of a Congregational minister. Her search took her to India, and in 1978 she spent four months in an ashram near Bombay. She has been active in a wide range of organizations, and presently a Reiki healing group meets weekly in her home. Betty and her husband, John, are parents of four grown children and live in York Center Community Cooperative near Lombard, Illinois.

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It is a special honor to be sharing my search with you, dear friends of Illinois Yearly Meeting. My soul has been nourished by you in many ways over the years, and I am grateful for the spiritual growth that has taken place in your midst.

It is intensely interesting to see the interconnecting links in one's life fall into place. Life comes full circle back to us in interesting ways. McNabb [the location of Illinois Yearly Meeting] is one of those links. In the years before I was introduced to the Society of Friends, while a Freshman at Blackburn College I didn't have money to travel home for the holidays. A classmate, Helen Dale Mathis, invited me to her family farm at McNabb. Those holidays on an Illinois farm were peak experiences for a lonely girl from Connecticut. And the love I have felt for McNabb from this first experience years ago has been

multiplied many times over during the summers at Illinois Yearly Meeting.

Today I would like to share with you some of my own personal search in the setting of the universal search for God, not only to let you know where I have been but also to encourage you to follow where you are led. Then I will touch on the eloquence of silence as it relates to some aspects of life, including the power of thought and the vision of hope. We will end with a "prayer for the planet."

As individuals and as a society we are both supremely insignificant and yet infinitely magnificent. We are gathered together today at the center of our universe — a universe which starts within this assemblage of gathered hearts, and extends to the far reaches of the cosmos and into unknown dimensions of being. We are a minute speck in the scheme of things, yet we are at one with the Infinite and are significant beyond comprehension.

All of life is a seeking and a finding, a journey in self-discovery, toward becoming our true selves. The search is many, the findings unique to each traveler in the inner spaces. The journey inward is the most important pursuit of our lives. To quote Gerald Heard, "As this is our life cycle, our growth curve, we had better not postpone it, for that goal alone can satisfy us and those who have attained it can alone save our society."

There is an innate hunger within to seek our wholeness. The more intensely we seek, however, the more painful is our realization of separateness. The search is common to seekers of whatever faith. We come into the world "trailing clouds of glory" yet we are blinded, clothed in veils of forgetfulness, and sheathed in ignorance of who we are. We have inklings of a truth that is beyond our grasp, and we seek without knowing exactly what it is that we seek or why we seek. The deeper we seek, the more elusive becomes the object of the search. We are like waves trying to find the sea.

But we are already whole. We are seeds of the master tree. We are love in manifestation. We are all that we seek to be, otherwise we would not begin the search. We seek to be whole because at some level we already know our wholeness. To quote Pascal, "You would not have sought me had you not already found me."

There is a unity in the religions of the world. It is not in their outward practice but in the inner process, the universal search for God. The end result of this mystical search is a universal inner experience of the One Reality. Many paths up the side of the mountain, they come together at the summit.

Howard Thurman used to draw a picture of a room; in the room is the experience of God. Many doors lead into the room, each door symbolizing a different religion. You can choose which door to enter, he would say, but the experience in the room is the same for all.

The search for God has been at times an obsession with me, and I can identify with the sense of spiritual anguish with which seekers from time immemorial have cried forth their pain and longing, as the Psalmist who wrote:

As the hart longs for flowing streams,

so longs my soul for Thee, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and behold the face of God?
My tears have been my food day and night,
while they say to me continually,
'Where is your God?' (Ps. 42:1-3)

The ancient Hindu scriptures, the Upanishads, also speak of the search and the finding:

Indivisible, infinite, the adorable One --
Let a man meditate on thee
Within his heart...
Let a man feel Thy presence,
Let him behold Thee within,
And to him shall come peace,
Eternal peace...

Zen master Gensha once said, "We are here as if immersed in water, head and shoulders underneath the great ocean, and how piteously we are extending our hands for water."

For most of my life I sought a transcendence outside myself, and could not conceive of a God who was also within. If I felt God within, it was because God reached in and touched me at the core of my being. It did not occur to me that God might be the very nature of my inner Self.

It is said in the Upanishads, "If you want truth as badly as a drowning man wants air, you will realize it in a moment." Sometimes the quest comes with just this kind of life and death urgency, and there is no escape. It lays hold of the mind and soul of a sincere seeker, leading him to go through untold hardships to find inner peace.

In the book, *The Chasm of Fire*, a woman tells of her experiences in India with a Sufi master. She went expecting, in her words, "wonderful teachings, but what the teacher mainly did was force me to face the darkness within myself, and it almost killed me....I was beaten down in every sense until I had to come to terms with that in me which I had been rejecting all my life." She goes on to say, "It is the task of the teacher to set the heart aflame with an unquenchable fire of longing; it is his duty to keep it burning until it is reduced to ashes. For only a heart that has burned itself empty is capable of love."

The inner journey is a continual process of classic surrender — a peeling away of layer after layer, opening, letting go, release. A tendering vulnerability is the state of the available soul, and a growing realization that nothing but my own mind stands between me and God.

"For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." (Matt. 16:25) I had a dream once in which I was given a mandala in the shape of a daisy. I asked, "Why a daisy?" The reply was, "So you remove the petals one by one until there is nothing left but the center."

But until we are ready to embark on the process of surrender, we try to accumulate happiness and inner peace in the only way we know how to find it ~~in the things of the world. We may pass through lifetime after lifetime accumulating one source of pleasure after another~~ a sense of fulfillment through power, possessions, relationships — but all the things of the world eventually leave us unfulfilled. Like moths to a flame, we continually seek and do not find.

When we finally turn to spirituality as the answer to our search, we tend to do in the same way. We see "Enlightenment Now!" emblazoned on the marquee and we rush to pay our money to obtain this precious commodity. And when one technique doesn't work we run to another and plunk down some more money, little realizing that it isn't something we go out and get, but rather something we give up. "The Way is gained by daily loss," says the Tao Te Ching, "Loss upon loss, until at last comes rest."

A paradox of life is that we seek harmony and inner peace, but in a sense, growth seems to come from being a little out of balance with life, to be always on the growing edge of life, straddling an abyss of unknowing.

At some point we may seek a teacher who can tell us the answers to life. The literature of the eastern religions is full of the stories of the quest for a teacher and the deeper meanings of life. The story is told of a seeker who deeply desired spiritual instruction. He went to a famous guru in India and asked if he would instruct him. The guru agreed and told him, in essence, that everything is consciousness, there is nothing but God, and you also are God. The seeker didn't understand, and the guru wouldn't explain further, so he went away disappointed.

After awhile he went to another guru and asked for his teachings. This guru told him, "I will instruct you, but you must first work for me for 12 years." The seeker agreed, and for 12 years he worked for the guru gathering cow dung, dung being a valuable commodity in the common life of India.

At the end of 12 years he went back to the guru and reminded him of his promise. The guru sat with him and told him that "everything is consciousness, God manifests as all things in the universe and as you too." This time the seeker realized its truth immediately. The truth hadn't changed in 12 years, but the mind of the seeker was now available.

At certain key points in your life the right books and people come your way. So it was for me with the writings of Gerald Heard, Evelyn Underhill and other Christian mystics. They pointed to a general map of the deeper search. In my search for God it was not an inner peace that I sought as much as a sword to cut through to the truth.

I was introduced to meditation at Friends General Conference 10 years ago, and I might say that it is meditation that has made the difference in my life. In personal meditation we go into the inner spaces, the jungles of the mind and the deserts of the soul; we meet ourselves at new depths and come out both less and more than when we went in. A sense of adventure is helpful on the Path, and from the beginning life began to take on an exciting quality. I found that stress was reduced and things didn't bother me as much.

There were conflicts I had to come to terms with at first. No one I knew was meditating ten years ago. How could I justify spending time "just sitting" when there was so much to be done? I was so oriented toward the need to be continually doing something that even ten minutes, at first, seems like an inordinate amount of time to be supposedly "doing nothing."

Further, I was overly anxious not to fall into the trap of quietism and felt an overwhelming need to balance the time spent in meditation with service in the world outside — to prove both to myself and others that meditation does not mean escapism but, rather, enables one better to function in the world.

Consequently I became terribly involved in all kinds of activities, committees, organizations, community service, international peace. Wherever there was a need I was there. My calendar was full. Simplicity was a far-off dream. Rather than a balance, I had gone overboard the other way.

After meditating on my own for a year, I felt the need of guidance. I had been introduced to oriental mysticism at Friends General Conference the year before and after some investigation found a Zen meditation class at the Buddhist Temple of Chicago. The discipline of mind and body which Zen provided was very important at this stage of the journey.

However, Zen provided another conflict. How could I justify following a non-Christian practice? I discovered, however, that the deep silence of Zen meditation was in keeping with Friends worship; Soto Zen emphasizes the slow blossoming of truth within; and in Zen I found a counterpart to the Christian mysticism which had meant so much to me. All of this, along with the disciplined practice, added a new dimension to my experience of Friends worship. The theological differences paled next to the experience itself.

At first I thought Zen would give me enlightenment. There are many "enlightenment" stories in Buddhist literature. Sensei, our teacher, would say, "There is no enlightenment as such," but I didn't understand. D. T. Suzuki, who was instrumental in making Zen intelligible to the west, wrote, "The Zen masters all proclaim that there is no enlightenment whatever which you can claim to have attained. If you say you have attained something, this is the surest proof that you have gone astray." Zen master Bassui elaborated, "There is nothing in particular to realize...the essential thing for enlightenment is to empty the mind of the notion of self."

After three years another spiritual guide came my way. This time it was a Hindu yogi, Swami Muktananda. There was little question from the beginning that he was someone I should pay attention to, but I resisted tooth and nail. If I had trouble justifying the theological differences between Zen and the Society of Friends, justification for following a Hindu guru was almost impossible to come by.

It is incredible in retrospect to see the agony I put myself through to justify the inner path to spiritual fulfillment, wherever it led. It was happening despite me. I sought spiritual development with all my heart and soul but was dragged kicking down the road with each new opening of the way. Perhaps I was being shown that God is One, that all religious paths are valid ways to find the one truth that is common to all.

I went to India to stay for four months in Muktananda's ashram, a spiritual community in Ganeshpuri, 40 miles from Bombay. When people there asked how long I had been following "Baba," as his followers call him, I always responded that I had been resisting him for two years. What I was doing at his ashram in India I wasn't quite sure. But I did know that I deeply desired a spiritual retreat.

The ashram discipline was firm. There were specified times for meditation, work and group chanting. Work was supposed to be performed in silence as much as feasible. With socializing at a minimum and much of the day spent in silence there were ample opportunities for insights into one's self-nature. The heightened spiritual energy made of the whole environment a learning situation. I found people and situations coming my way that showed aspects of myself that I needed to work on. In the silence I could observe my thoughts and their effects.

Muktananda's central teaching was the divinity of the inner Self. He would say, "Honor your Self...for God dwells within you as you." He seemed to be speaking of the Inner Light and "that of God within." At some point while I was in the ashram ~~I didn't notice when it happened~~ my search for God came to an end. It wasn't that I had found anything but simply that I no longer needed to search.

"God, soul and nature are one" said another teacher, Sri Anirvan, with a following in northern India. "Spiritual growth is not an intellectual process but a life process — an all-round growth. It is not the attainment of something distant but a flowering of what is within. Remove all obstacles, conventions, superstitions, and you will find that you are flooded with light which was just waiting for the windows of our heart to be opened."

In the western cultures we are accustomed to many words. Truth comes in large tomes, in erudite lectures, through the airwaves of the mass media. But the Hindu mystic says, "The final knowledge comes not in words, but in silence."

It is said that Buddha's greatest sermon was one in which he stood in silence before his assembled monks and without saying a word slowly turned a flower in his fingers. Only one of the monks understood, and smiled. No words were needed to transmit the highest teaching to the available mind.

Nityananda was a great teacher in India with a large following, yet he rarely spoke. Just being in his presence was enough.

Muktananda once replied to a deep question, "There are no words for that experience. To understand it you would have to live with me and learn the language that could describe it. In that language there is only stillness."

One of the saints of India, Shri Gajanan Maharaj of Nasik, when asked about one of the deep truths, said, "This state is indescribable in words. All words, therefore, are meaningless and silence is the only

eloquence regarding it.”

Silence is the eloquence through which deepest truth is revealed. The intellect is limited. It too often muddies the waters of clear perception and clouds the basic clarity which is the birthright of the mind. The Zen teacher would say that truth cannot be expressed in words and concepts, and when we try to do so we have lost it.

Bricks make a strong house, but we don't brick up the doorways, we leave a space. Fine china makes a lovely teapot, but the usefulness of the pot is in the space within. In the case of the doorway and the teapot it is the empty space that makes them valuable to us. So it is with the silence of the mind. It is in the stillness and space that the spirit can do its greatest work.

The deepest spiritual insights are wordless. A Friend called one morning to say that in meditation that morning she had had an overwhelming awareness of the reality of the Inner Self, the God Within. Her voice was filled with awe. The awareness was accompanied by a certainty, an understanding that could not be disputed, yet there were no words with which to express what had transpired. Her experience was hers alone, and there was no way I could participate in its unique expression. A wordless knowing, an indisputable clarity of understanding — such is the eloquence of the mystical experience. It speaks to something deep within us, and we are never quite the same.

A transforming silence is "no passive thing," Eastcott says in *The Silent Path*. "It is a vibrant presence which fills any vacuum in sound and conveys its own living quality. ...In its secret depths power is generated, problems are solved, realizations are reached, sensitivity is developed; in them we are recharged, regenerated, renewed. And silence carries healing on its wings."

Healing comes as the mind leaves its frenzied activity and glides into the peaceful still deep pool of the heart; there it is refreshed, renewed and nourished. The inner stresses dissolve. Healing comes when we let go of daily concerns and simply bask in the inner light, or rest in the healing hands of God, or when the rosebud in the heart opens and its divine nectar floods the cells and organs of the body.

There is another essential way in which healing takes place in the silence. At some point we have to stop thinking and searching and doing, and simply let what is already within us become integrated. In meditation we come to terms with our deeper selves and we find the real Source of healing.

In Meeting for Worship, vocal ministry is only one of the ways we minister to each other. Those who minister in silence minister to us as truly as do those who speak. The combined light of our individual candles is bright indeed, and in the communion of silence we help each other in ways we know not of. When we are fully open to the Light we may be used by the Spirit in the healing of one another. It is important, however, to remember that it is the Spirit that guides, and we are merely "being present where we are."

One who has, through daily spiritual practice traversed the landscape of the inner self, lights the way for the rest of us who follow the Path. George Fox was led to cry out to the Lord his distress at his inward sufferings only to be told that he needed to have "a sense of all conditions" so that he might "speak to

all conditions." Had Fox not done the inner work in solitude, could he have served us as well?

We carry around within us a silent place. It is a reminder of our true nature. The frenzied outer life with its demands on the very marrow of the soul sometimes leaves us wrung out like parched earth, and the soul peeks out through cracks in the crusted soil. At such times it is helpful to retreat for a few moments into the rich inner stillness, that inward place where we reside.

Perhaps to live in continual prayer is to stay in touch with this silent place within, and simply to be available to God — to have one's "spirit open to the winds of God." as Howard Thurman would say.

Kenneth Boulding said in a talk at Fermilab, "If the human race is to survive, it has to change its way of thinking more in the next 25 years than in the past 25,000 years." I would like to suggest that this goes beyond philosophical concepts to include our personal habits of thought.

In speaking of the eloquence of silence, we are also speaking of the power and reality of thought, which is silent only to the ear.

Both music and noise are essentially vibrations in the air, but these vibrations have vastly different effects on us. Music soothes and uplifts and strengthens, while noise irritates and confuses us. In a somewhat similar manner thoughts and emotions may be said to create vibrations in the subtle atmosphere of consciousness. We are familiar with the way strong thought images backed by intense emotion spread like fire through a group and the group becomes a mob. In a similar, though more subtle way, the mental images we hold and their corresponding emotions seem to affect the atmosphere of thought in which we live.

The story is told of a temple trustee in a small town in India. It was the custom for the trustees to put a gold coin in the collection box every month. One day the trustee thought to himself, "Just this once I'll put a copper coin in the box. No one will know the difference with so many coins." But that month when they opened the box they found nothing but copper coins.

Our thoughts seem to have a substance of sorts. Negative thoughts attract negative thinking, and conversely, positive thoughts encourage a corresponding state of mind in others. This is particularly true of thoughts that have emotional content for us.

I have been haunted for years by the words of one of Dostoyevsky's characters who said, in effect, "If men had only thought me a good man, what a good man I should have been then."

Olga Worrall, the world-renowned healer, said in a workshop recently that we make life more difficult for others when we think limiting thoughts of them. "Every dynamic thought is a prayer," she said. This suggests that our thoughts may have a responsibility matched by our deeds. Further, what good we must do for each other when we see that of God in one another.

There is another aspect to the power of thoughts. "As he thinketh in his heart, so is he." (Prov. 23:7 KJ) It is not only others who are affected, but our thoughts have the strongest effect on ourselves.

Muktananda once said, "We forget that by thinking negatively of others we are creating an entire world of negativity for ourselves. All our thoughts leave their traces on our psyche. Whatever thoughts we direct at others, whether negative or positive, actually have their strongest effect on us. Every thought is like a seed cast in the mind, the fruits of which we ourselves will receive later on."

Neville sums it up: "The good you subjectively accept as true of others will not only be expressed by them, but a full share will be realized by you."

The Bhagavad Gita says, "Man is made by his belief. As he believes, so is he." A few years ago a group in our Meeting was reading and discussing *The Nature of Personal Reality*, a Seth book by Jane Roberts. The primary theme of the book is the power of our attitudes and beliefs in creating the reality that we experience.

As a result of our reading, I began to look at the idle thoughts that occupied my mind. I was appalled at the messages I was giving myself, the extent to which I was putting myself down, belittling and berating my actions. Even my dreams showed me a little girl within who was neglected, bedraggled and unloved, and I was led to understand that this was what I was doing to myself.

Life is a great teacher. At about this same time I had a very difficult work relationship. The person I worked for seemed to find fault with much of what I did. At first I took it as inexperience and tried harder. But experience failed to change the situation. She continued to berate my best efforts. When I had been on the job for a year, it suddenly occurred to me that she was doing to me what I had unwittingly been doing to myself for years. She was simply reflecting my own state of mind. With this revelation came the understanding that the purpose of this job in my life had been served. It had revealed me to myself.

About three weeks later an opportunity presented itself for a change of job situation, and I took it. But I had learned my lesson and began to work on slowly weeding out negative self-imagining, affirming myself with each self-deprecating thought as it came up. I found meditation helpful in affirming what was real.

The problem areas of life are golden opportunities, golden gifts of the Spirit, to enable us to come to grips with that which is unfinished within us. Something is pressing to be born in us, something seeks expression. Perhaps we are pressed face to face with a situation that we can no longer ignore. Sometimes it is a lesson, such as forgiveness, that is repeatedly brought back to us until we have learned it. Or it may be an inner quality which we need to develop and we are pushed into the water, so to speak, to force us to learn how to swim. Sometimes the golden gift may be a difficult relationship that brings us to a deeper understanding of ourselves. Each such situation leads to an understanding of who we are and what we need to work on. The blessings of the spirit are not always comfortable. Sometimes we do not see the value of crisis until it is long past and we look back on the openings it brought in our lives.

Life is a mirror in which we, ourselves, are reflected. But we don't always see it that way. We think life is something that is being done to us rather than something we are doing to ourselves. The world, as a mirror of our inner state of being, is thus our most impersonal teacher.

All of life is a process of becoming ourselves. And in learning who we are, we are discovering a new way to see. George Fox had a vision in which he saw an "ocean of darkness" but what was significant to him was not the darkness but "the infinite ocean of light and love which flowed over the ocean of darkness."

In learning how to see in new ways, therefore, it is helpful for us to observe how the highly evolved person views the world. We note with interest that Muktananda said, "The inner knowledge manifests in the outer world. The out-flowing of the joy of the inner consciousness manifests as the magnificence of the outer world....There is no flaw in any object in this world; the only flaw is in our own vision." To see with clarity is to regain a lost innocence.

We labor under the paradox of innate perfection and the process of becoming perfected. How we deal with this paradox, how we see the world, has a great deal to do with how we relate to the world. Transformation of our vision transforms our relationship to everything around us.

As we get deeper into this question, however, we find that perhaps we don't need to put labels on the world at all. It is we who have put judgments on it of perfection and imperfection, of light and darkness. And I am continually reminded simply to see what IS. Hope is the vision of things as they ARE.

William James said, "Any idea constantly held before the mind must come into existence." This gives us cause for caution, but it also gives us hope and intimations on a way to envision a new reality for ourselves and for the world.

We dream a dream with God. And in the dreaming we see the potential within mankind and a vision of a new planetary reality. Holding the vision we work within its context to bring the vision into being.

However, we hold no attachment to preconceived results. It is enough that we move as we are led. The ways of the Eternal are not always visible to our limited sight. And it may be, as Carol Murphy wrote in *O Inward Traveller*, that sometimes just being is the best kind of doing. It is God who weaves us all together on his loom to his own pattern.

We can make a difference. And in this it is important to realize that we are not working alone, that there are many forces for good one Reality at work in the cosmos. We are but a small segment of the vast Eternal Good in process. To key into this regular daily times of silence are helpful. These periods of silence are times in which we become attuned and yield to the greater Will. These are times when we simply learn to be, and perhaps it is in the extension of being that we fulfill our destiny.

"If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'move hence to yonder place,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you." (Matt.17:20)

I would like to end with a prayer for the planet, in which I invite everyone to participate. I believe that

right here, right now, right where we sit, we can do something important for the world. Let us settle comfortably, gather our mustard seed faith, and use our power of envisioning to bring a little love, peace and harmony to the world and to ourselves. I invite you to close your eyes and envision, or imagine to the best of your ability, in any way you can, a ball of shimmering white light in our midst — a dynamic sphere of light energy. This is the healing light of love, peace and harmony. Then let us imagine this radiant ball of light expanding until it fills the room. We are all bathed within and without by the healing light of love and peace.

Let us envision the light expanding to fill this building...the town...the state...our homes and the places where we work. The light then expands to fill the nation and the hemisphere. It spreads over to the other side of the world, so that the whole planet is bathed in the healing light of love, peace and harmony...We hold the image in our minds for a moment, the image of our planet bathed in healing light.

Then we slowly bring the light back...to this hemisphere...this nation...state...the town...and finally back to this room again. The sphere of radiant healing light is now back in this room. Now let us each take some of this light. Take as much as you want, the light is from an Infinite Source and thus cannot be diminished. And let us carry this Light with us throughout the coming weeks.

Now, may you be blessed with the healing light of love, peace and harmony. And may the abundance of the Spirit fill your days. Thank you.

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