

Encountering Elizabeth Fry: A poet's reflection

By Julie Robinson

The journal¹ of Elizabeth Fry has fed the imaginations of activists, reformers, feminists and thinkers of religion since its publication in 1848. My own reading of her journal has inspired the following series of poems. For each poem I have provided some brief contextual information. My hope is that these poems might encourage someone to discover or rediscover Elizabeth's evocative and stimulating story for themselves.

I.

My Dream
The shore is alive.
Night tide widens
like a mouth at the beginning
of speech.
Water creeps.
My white gown flaps,
my body currents
down the throat of sea
into belly of a name.

What name?

In the dark, almost womb,
a pounding in the mouth,
in ears that can't hear,
in the pulse
tapped out
from my heart
before speech—

The name,
unutterable as light.

Elizabeth noted in her journal on April 21, 1798, that she had never missed a week or a few nights without dreaming she was nearly washed away by the sea, terrified at being drowned, hoping to be saved. She recorded the dream when she

realised it was no longer recurring. She interpreted the dream as the want of true faith and wrote: "The day when I felt I had really and truly got true and real faith, that night I dreamed the sea was coming as usual to wash me away, but I was beyond its reach; beyond its powers to wash me away; since that night I do not remember having dreamed that dream." (p. 47) Her experience in the dream of being swallowed by water evoked the Jonah story in my mind and in composing the poem I attempted to juxtapose the darkness of immersion, where God supposedly is not, with the Quaker idea of that of God in everyone or inner light, or an encounter of the ineffable God even within oneself.

In Elizabeth's journal we see her struggle to articulate this encounter. In February she wrote, "I have felt that there is a God... like a refreshing shower falling upon earth, that has been dried up for ages." ([February 4, 1798] p. 36) She possessed no systematics and very little theology, yet she acknowledged an emotional, even corporeal, need for faith. She remembered this need later on and it is, I believe, the reason she introduced religious instruction to the women inmates at Newgate.

II.

My Mind Feels Flat Though I Want True Faith

I feel my face taut
my back as stiff
as the rod and staff
of old testament comfort—
the smooth black book
open upon my palms
its rice-paper weight negligible
in spite of the magnitude
of its contents

*my voice rings a black ink
in the white suffering of that room—
Bob's room
his body afloat
upon a scatter of dark leaves
patterned in upholstery
and I edged on a stool beside*

*at first I do not hear
his reedy whine
nor the quick crack
of wet wood burning
but the word on death
comes to an end and I sit
my hand on his quiet arm
for some time afterward*

The first acts of charity Elizabeth recorded were her visits to a dying servant named Bob. She read to him from the New Testament, sat with him and eventually witnessed his death. A phrase that occurs periodically throughout her journal is “my mind feels flat” or “feeling flat.” I understand this expression to indicate an inner impasse, a lack of inspiration or direction. It is not an enduring state, but one with which most of us may be familiar, and perhaps it is at such points in our journeys when the practice or even happenstance of silence is most soothing.

The spirit that moved Elizabeth to comfort Bob is the same spirit in which she opened a school for impoverished children (up to eighty at a time, teaching them herself) and in which she eventually entered Newgate. In her journal we see Elizabeth begin her reflection on faith while simultaneously finding occupation in the clothing and teaching of those less materially fortunate, and prior to her commitment to any specific religious expression. (She had not yet chosen Quakerism for herself.) This leads me to wonder about the relationship between faith, the offering of ourselves to others, and an ethos of silence within which our lives may grow.

III.

*Slight Harriett Skelton
What she sees now
is not the small quadrangle
of mingling prisoners her eyes
have fixed upon
through one narrow window
of the condemned
cell.
Nor does she hear
the din of disgruntled convicts
filtering through iron gratings
of the interior.*

*The cold in her hands
is not a brisk winter wind
chilling through thin worn cotton.
It is not her feet
that will take her beyond
though they mark a damp stockingless
pace across stone.*

*She no longer remembers
the aberration in her routine—
she needed flour, thread,
how did she pay?—
that tipped her into the funnel
of dread
that is Newgate.*

*She does not imagine
tomorrow's scaffold,
or even her husband.
It is six o'clock
and she has
not one moment
to spare.*

Elizabeth's daughters, in the course of editing her journals, included saved letters from women convicts who had been so touched by Elizabeth's efforts that they were moved to thank her in their last hours. One woman concluded her letter to Mrs. Fry this way: “It is now past six o'clock, I have not one moment to spare; I must devote the remainder to the service of my offended God.” (p. 306)

When Elizabeth first met the women prisoners in Newgate (she spent a great deal of energy convincing those in authority that she would indeed survive this encounter), she found what the inmates themselves described as “the most wretched of the English nation,” (p. 350) that is, women and children of desperate appearance, wanting in clothing and cleanliness, loud and vulgar, often fighting for food, gambling, etc., congested together with no separation or organisation among them.

Her first concern was to divide the women into groups, first by crime and then into manageable smaller groups, and assigning monitors, chosen from among themselves, to each group. She enabled the women to choose a school teacher from among themselves and arranged for the donation of educational materials. To address the problem of order, the women drew up a list of rules and agreed by a show of hands to follow these rules and acquiesce to the consequences of infraction. Secondly, Elizabeth saw that cloth and sewing items were provided so that the women might begin to produce clothing for themselves and, later, for troops. In this latter case, she arranged for the payment of wages and the putting aside of a portion of the earnings for each woman inmate. This last effort was provoked by the fact that most offenders were driven into crime by sheer poverty. Training the women to sew and knit and to put by savings was a method of providing the women with a small means and a livelihood. Here, I offer, Elizabeth engaged in a critical re-visioning of the very structures of her society.

IV.

*As to a Marriage Feast
See these yellowed women
of gnarled skin, overgrown hair?
An eden of flowers,
grasses shadow-patterned by sunlight
through fruit-rich trees.*

*The smell of their underground
stone-damp breath?
Cardamom, cinnamon and sweet rice.*

*Their parched hands?
Offerings of new wine.
Dissonant voices?
Birdsong.
This is the day
the Lord has made
let us rejoice
and be glad in it.*

Elizabeth also initiated a group of volunteer women to read, primarily but not exclusively, from the New Testament to the inmates as they worked. A New Testament quotation pinned inside the Ladies' Committee Room at Newgate was “Go Upstairs as to a marriage feast.” (p. 306) I imagine the room to be a place where a volunteer could leave her belongings, gather her materials and possibly centre herself in a few moments of silence before taking up her post as reader. I also imagine seeing Christ celebrating among friends, and turning the water into wine. I hear in the phrase, “go upstairs as to a marriage feast” the invitation to participate in transformation. It required of the volunteer a mental and emotional re-creation of the place she found herself in.

To close, Elizabeth appeared confident that her offering of both religion and industry had merit. Why? Because she herself could testify to them. Her almost twenty-year longing for true faith and meaningful activity were consummated in a transformation, which she in turn offered to others. I wonder if the Quaker notion of silence as perhaps a physical, emotional, even psychic resting place could be described as a womb within which faith — a spiritual journey — begins, continues to grow, and from which faith emerges into the world in the form of good works. ☞

NOTE: ¹ALL QUOTATIONS ARE FROM *MEMOIR OF ELIZABETH FRY VOL.I.* LONDON: JOHN HATCHARD AND SON, 1848, REFERRED TO IN THE TEXT BY DATE OF ENTRY (IF APPLICABLE) AND PAGE NUMBER.

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