

Elizabeth Gray Vining *speaks*

Although best known for her work after World War II as the tutor to the Crown Prince of Japan, Elizabeth Gray Vining (1902-) has had a rich and varied life, primarily as a writer.

Born in Germantown-Philadelphia, she attended the Stevens School for Girls and then was graduated from the Germantown Friends School. Later she earned degrees from Bryn Mawr College and the Library School of the Drexel Institute.

After a few years as a teacher and librarian, she devoted herself almost exclusively to writing. In 1929 she married Morgan Vining, a staff member of the Extension Division of the University of North Carolina. But within less than five years, his life was cut short by a tragic automobile accident. Plunged into the depths of grief, she explored various approaches to the meaning of life, eventually triumphing over that tragedy and becoming a more mature, mellow person.

From 1946 until 1950 she served as tutor to the Crown Prince of Japan, the story of which she has told with fascinating details in *Windows for the Crown Prince*. A related volume is *Return to Japan*.

In a lifetime of writing she has produced several novels, among them *The Virginia Exiles* and *Take Heed of Loving Me* (about John Donne), thirteen books for children, including *Adam of the Road*, which was awarded the prestigious Newberry Medal; two autobiographical accounts—*Quiet Pilgrimage* and *Being Seventy*; and several publications on Quakerism, including *Rufus M. Jones; Friend for Life*, *Women in the Society of Friends*, *The World in Tune*, and *Contributions of the Quakers*.

Glimpses into her thoughts can be gained from the following quotations as she speaks:

ON LIFE...

"Life is a trust, given into our hands, to hold carefully, to use well, to enjoy, to give back when the time comes...."

ON RELIGION...

"For me, religion was, in Fosdick's phrase, 'a total response to life's meaning.' I felt a firm conviction of the unity of all life, a kinship with all living things, even to the invisible busy atom, a sense that we all were made of the same stuff and moved to the same patterns, from the atoms to the universes, the macrocosm repeating the microcosm, that love and truth and goodness in a single life were interpenetrated by the infinite love and truth and goodness which we might call God."

"But religion is not alone a matter of ritual or of intellectual understanding; it is emotional and spiritual, and the best way to get it is to absorb it in childhood from the atmosphere of one's own family. A child who grows up surrounded by people whose lives are rooted and grounded in faith has the best chance of understanding and living by the reality of the unseen God. Later in life it comes generally in answer to great need or because the heart is opened to it by great experiences of sorrow or joy, and he who would give help must wait until he is asked for it, or at least until there is some evidence of receptiveness."

ON PRAYER...

"There is so much wrong that needs righting, so little we individually can do, except to pray. That we can always do, and we should not underestimate the power of prayer. In some way that we do not understand, the very act of selfless prayer seems to open a channel for God's healing action."

ON DEATH, GRIEF AND LIFE'S DEEPEST MEANINGS . . .

"Now that my deepest human love (her husband) had been removed, I found that beauty and courage were not enough. I began blindly, fumblingly, the search for a meaning in life, for a philosophy in which I might find reality and strength by which to live."

"Books had always been my resource in time of need; now, as soon as I was allowed to read, I turned again to books, not for escape but to try to find meaning in what had happened. I read Whitehead's *Adventures of Ideas* and *Religion in the Making*, Maeterlinck's *Wisdom and Destiny*, Vida Scudder's *On Journey*, Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth*, Sarah Cleg-horn's *Threescore*, the poems of Yeats and Santayana, and the *Bible*, especially Isaiah, Ecclesiastes, and Ruth. Among the books which my father used to keep on a shelf close to his hand for rereading was Edmund Gosse's two-volume *Life and Letters of Doctor John Donne* . . . Now I found and read his poems on love and death."

"Gradually I learned one more thing, quite simple and obvious to many but hidden from me at first: that grief is something not to overcome or to escape but to live with. It is always there, as perceptible as a person who will not go away in spite of hints or plain speaking, but one can make room for it, recognize it as a companion instead of an intruder, be aware of it but not possessed by it; one can continue one's work, one's occupation, even one's joys, in its presence."

"Somehow we must learn not only to meet it (sorrow) with courage, which is comparatively easy, but with serenity, which is more difficult, being not a single act but a way of living."

ON EDUCATION...

"There are...three main purposes in education for the world of the future. The first is to interpret the world truthfully to the child, to tell him about the past so that he might understand not only his own heritage but those of other nations, to explain to him the nature of the world he lives in and to open his mind to its beauties, to the laws which govern it and the ways in which its benefits can be made to serve the greatest number of people. To interpret the world...calls for loyalty to the truth above all other things, including the pronouncements of official bodies; it requires a sincere and devoted search for the truth on the part of the teacher—and though we can never wholly attain truth, even the search for it is ennobling.

"The second purpose of education...is to help the child to develop his full capacities of mind, body and spirit. Each child is unique, like a leaf or a flower; each child must be allowed to grow to his best flowering in his own way. A morning-glory must be encouraged to climb, a carrot to plunge deep. We must not expect the morning-glory to give us food, or scold if its petals fold up when the sun is off them, nor must we labor over the carrot to make it produce fragile blossoms. Our aim is to develop the best morning-glories and the best carrots possible.

"Much of our teaching...is unconscious; the genuineness of our respect for the dignity of the individual and his unique gifts will be revealed not by what we say but unconsciously, countless times a day, by the way in which we meet the least and the greatest of our fellow men, the most troublesome imps in our classroom as well as the most promising pupils....

"The third great purpose is to give the child the tools which he needs to do his work in the world. The gardener is helpless without spade or hoe; the carpenter must have his saw and hammer."

ON OUR MINOR ECSTASIES...

"Only a few people, and those few but infrequently, know ecstasy. It is a big word; it means a state of being outside oneself and outside time, caught up on an overwhelming emotion; it implies a high occasion and a greatness of response to it.... With such grandeurs of experience, I am not now concerned. I am thinking of what I have learned to call minor ecstasies, bits of star dust which are for all of us, however limited our opportunities. Everyone has these moments as they are recognized and cherished. Something seen, something heard, something felt, flashes upon one with a bright freshness, and the heart, tired and sick or sad or merely indifferent, stirs and lifts in answer.... Exercising our faculty for minor ecstasies may actually increase the number of them we feel...."

ON JAPAN AND THE JAPANESE...

"This universal love of beauty is one of the purest qualities of the Japanese character and represents a gift which the Japanese people have to make to that other part of the world which is so taken up with utility and equality that it tends to overlook the claims of beauty."

"About the sincerity and genuineness of Japanese friendliness I had no doubt or qualifications. I based my answer not only on the courtesy and consideration I myself had everywhere received but on the attitude of people in the remotest villages toward Americans."

"What impressed me, however, was the absence of bitterness among the people whom I knew. There was an acceptance of things as they were of which I think we as a people are incapable. People who had been burned out two or three times and who now were engaged in a desperate struggle to keep alive and to maintain standards, were able to put the past behind them and go forward with patience and courage."

ON SOME ASPECTS OF WRITING . . .

"Can Pegasus, the fiery steed of the Muses, be harnessed? What bag of oats can you offer him that will coax him to draw near enough to slip the bridle over his head?"

"The deep self . . . is a storehouse of rich material. Childhood experiences long forgotten, race memories are there lodged; possibly streams from the collective unconscious flow through it. It is also a repository of facts, impressions, scenes, conversations, ideas, that have been absorbed and assimilated. The relationship between the surface mind and the deep self . . . must be tended and fed. Most of this process goes on subliminally . . . but the process can also be consciously forwarded It means, not a stowing away of facts as a squirrel stores nuts, often forgetting where he has buried them, but an absorbing of their essence and meaning, a making of them one's own by thinking about them, ruminating as a cow chews her cud, rolling them over with delight on one's mental tongue Reading, music, art, travel—all provide fodder for the silo of the unconscious Music and art and drama enlarge and deepen and sensitize; travel brings new horizons. Out of experiences of all kinds comes the stuff of one's writing, but like the fodder in the silo, it has to ripen and ferment there in the dark before it is brought out for use."

"When all the roads are mapped and the signposts set in place, everyone still has to find his own way. The signposts may be dim and undecipherable. They may be written in some ancient runic alphabet. Pegasus may be skittish and difficult to catch. Or worse, we may, like the young presumptuous poets of whom Keats wrote, 'sway about on a wooden rockinghorse, and call it Pegasus.' But still, the effort is beneficial, and any real contact with our deep selves refreshes and strengthens. It brings reward in any field of endeavor."

ON POETRY...

"Poetry is meant to transmit emotion rather than logical thought.... Terser, more condensed, more elliptical than prose, it draws images from the senses, it calls on the power of association to bypass the intellect and cut straight through to the heart. The analytical surface mind may boggle at the idiom, but the deep self has received the message intended for it."

"The poets are admittedly more sensitive than the rest of us. We cannot all expect such striking—and even alarming—physical symptoms, but if the verse read gives us even a small stab of feeling, a heightened awareness of beauty or meaning, then it is for us poetry, and the reading of it brings increasingly, the more it is done, a joy and richness into our lives."

"We have always had poetry that was difficult to understand, that did not yield its meaning at the first reading. Part of the joy is the reading and rereading, over and over, to oneself and aloud, until enough of the poet's intention comes through to deliver that little shock of delight or flash of illumination that makes the poem ours."

"Not all of our emotions are rich and vibrant, eager for expression. Some are unformed, hidden, unknown to us, likely to be starved and lost before they ever come to their full existence. Poetry evokes these fragile, deeply buried, often unconscious stirrings and offers us a symbol or even a statement which we recognize as the truth for which we groped."

"Satisfactory as poetry is when read and enjoyed in solitude, it is more than a lonely pastime; it is perhaps best enjoyed in groups, and it offers one of the best excuses for drawing a congenial group together."

ON BECOMING SEVENTY...

"O God our Father, spirit of the universe, I am old in years and in the sight of others, but I do not feel old within myself. I have hopes and purposes, things I wish to do before I die. A surging of life within me cries, 'Not yet! Not yet!' more strongly than it did ten years ago, perhaps because the nearer approach of death arouses the defensive struggle of the instinct to cling to life. Help me to loosen, fiber by fiber, the instinctive strings that bind me to the life I know. Infuse me with Thy spirit so that it is to Thee I turn, not the old ropes of habit and thought. Make me poised and free, ready when the intimation comes, to go forward eagerly and joyfully into the new phase of life that we call death.... If pain comes before the end, help me not to fear it or struggle against it, but to welcome it as a hastening of the process by which the strings that bind me to life are untied. Give me joy in awaiting the great change that comes after this life of many changes, let my self be merged in Thy Self as a candle's wavering light is caught up in the sun."

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