

The Elisabeth Elliot Newsletter

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What the Savages Taught Me

For the whole first year that I lived with the Auca Indians (1958–1959), I watched and learned and kept my mouth shut. I had to keep my mouth shut most of the time because I did not know the Auca language. Although the language itself was highly complex, the definition of my task was simple: learn it.

I spent a second year there, when I had a fairly workable knowledge of the language. I learned more about the Indians, about how they felt and thought, and why they did things the way they did. As a result, more questions were raised in my mind, especially about my own thoughts and feelings and ways of doing things. Often the Auca way seemed better. It was always a sensible and simple way.

I was driven to the admission that I had not as many answers as I had thought. Why was I here? To “serve the Lord,” of course. But I had assumed too much. How was I to do it? What did it mean? I wanted to give God’s Word to the Indians. What, exactly, did this mean? How would that Word be revealed? In trying to get to the bottom of these issues, I did not want to be misled by prejudices born of my American culture or my church tradition.

Here are “heathen” people, I told myself. Was the difference between good and evil the same for them as it was for me? What would “Christian” conduct mean to the Aucas? I kept balancing the Auca way of life against the American, or against what I had always taken to be the Christian.

I found the Aucas easy to love, generous, intelligent, happy. But what of their morals? I had come from a society where polygamy was illegal to one

where it was permissible. Here it seemed to be merely a question of taste. A man might have as many wives as he cared to support at one time, but he did not go and help himself to another man’s wife without authorization. In my society a man might neglect even the one wife he had, he might play with other men’s wives, and still keep his job and most of his friends.

In America a man who switched a naked child with nettles would be called cruel. Aucas considered this a legitimate and effective form of punishment, and were outraged to see me spank my three-year-old child. I was, to them, a savage. But were the Aucas not killers? They were, but let us not forget that in our society it is permissible to murder a man not only in one’s heart, but also by verbally cutting him to pieces before his friends. Aucas had not been acquainted with this method.

In America, standards of dress vary every few years, and costumes that are considered acceptable today might have landed the wearer in jail a decade earlier. The Aucas were unhampered by clothing and the caprices of fashion (with the vanity, jealousy, covetousness and discontent which it fosters), but stuck firmly to a timeless code of modesty. In their nakedness they accepted themselves and one another for what they were, always abiding by the rules: men and women did not bathe together, women taught their daughters how to sit and stand with modesty, men taught their sons how to wear the string which was their only adornment. Physiological functions were discussed in public but performed in strictest privacy.

I saw the Indians live in a harmony which far surpassed anything I had seen among those who

call themselves Christians. I found that even their killing had at least as valid reasons as the wars in which my people engaged.

Could I really offer them a better way? I was a representative of the One who said, “I am the Way.” I wanted to be very sure I knew what He did actually say about the questions of conduct and service, for it was to Him above all others that I must give account.

From my Journal

(I have been keeping some sort of a journal since 1938, often not writing in it every day, but recording events big and small, my conundrums, my joys. Apropos of the article above, here is an excerpt from my journal from September, 1969. I had married Addison Leitch on New Year's Day, 1969, and I was learning how to juggle my new responsibilities. Although it represents quite a different set of circumstances from the ones I had in the jungle, I was still thinking about how my daily life was meant to be ordered, under God.)

September 29, 1969

It is a Monday morning and having put last night's and this morning's dishes in the dishwasher, I washed the remaining pots and pans, cleaned up the stove and counter, made the bed, and cleaned up the puppy's scatterings. Then I checked my list for today: grocery-shopping, doctor's appointment, pick up photographs, call locksmith to fix bathroom door, clean Add's study, put prices on things for garage sale, write Tom, call Katherine, finish making skirt, wash hair, get out winter clothes, return book to library, iron, have Elizabeth for lunch. Now I have come down to my study to try to put in two hours of writing.

But first I prayed, asking God for guidance today—how to do things serenely, in their proper order and each as an offering of faith to Him in whose hands are my “times.” I asked also for clear direction as to my new responsibilities. Having

been recently married and recently moved into a new house and community—how shall I know what to do to help my husband, my daughter (who is in a new school), my church, the college where Add teaches, my new neighbors, my “reading public”? It is all too easy to leap into the saddle and ride off in all directions.

“Next week I've *got* to get organized,” I tell myself. But I know the absurdity of such a resolution. It won't work. It's today that I have, only today, so I'd better organize my tasks and do them carefully, one by one. And the Lord who walked this earth and knows all its exigencies and interruptions and frustrations walks with me.

September 30, 1969

Sitting on flat granite rocks by the sea. The water is calm and swells gently in the morning sunshine, sliding up the dark brown seaweed-covered rocks. A single lobster fisherman checks his pots. The motor of his boat is muffled in the distance. Seagulls and crows glide nearby.

Yesterday's schedule went fairly well. The photographs were not finished, though they had been promised ten days ago. The bank had closed at 2:30; I got there at 3:00. But we are not let loose in a chaotic world. Our lives, as God promised David, are “ordered in all things and sure.” So a trifle like a ten-mile drive to find one's photographs not yet ready must mean *something*, and we walk in faith if we can believe that and give thanks.

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“Do it *now*” is a good motto, I think. It is a lovely morning, cool and dewy, with the promise of the warmth of an Indian summer day. Should I return to my basement study to work on my writing, or should I get in the car and go to the sea? The ocean is always there, vast and strong and inviting, but the weather does not always invite. Today it does. I wanted to see the sea, to sit beside it and breathe the salt air. “Do it now,” I said, and came.

Responsibilities? Work to be done? Yes. But it is usually possible to sacrifice a little somewhere else, to rearrange the mundane routine a little in order to *live!* Have we not some obligation to contemplate what the Maker of the Universe has created?

I’m getting stuffy. It is lovely here, wonderfully lovely, and I’m glad I came.

My Little Frame of Reference

God leads me, I believe, within my own frame of reference. What I am, where I am, how I got there, all have a great deal to do with what my frame of reference is.

Consider, for example, the vast differences between the frames of reference of Rahab, the harlot, David, the handsome young keeper of sheep, Esther, the loveliest woman in a heathen king’s harem, and a tax collector named Matthew. What of a redheaded monk in Germany, a noblewoman in the court of Louis XIV, a Russian pilgrim seeking in the forests and steppes the meaning of the Jesus Prayer, a Bible Belt farmwife, a Japanese university student, a Jewish psychiatrist, or a Long Island Episcopalian?

I grew up in a middle-class fundamentalist family in Philadelphia. Family prayers, Sunday school and church, table talk about God and Christian people and Christian work were very much a part of the fabric of my life. It hardly occurred to me that God needed to meet different people in different ways, or that his truth could take forms that

would be unrecognizable to me. I saw a certain kind of Christianity in operation, and to me that was what it meant to be a Christian. It took a while for my imagination to go to work to apply that vision to people in other categories such as those listed above, but in the meantime God met me where I was. When I began to learn of the wideness in his mercy, my faith began to grow, and I saw that salvation was a scheme of infinitely vaster dimensions than I had dreamed.

Whatever our views, they are probably too narrow. Our God is, as J.B. Phillips has said, too small. But the wonderful thing is that God is willing to start there. He can lead us into what the psalmist calls large and even wealthy places.

**from my book, *God’s Guidance:
A Slow and Certain Light***

Make Friends With Your Trials

“Make friends with your trials as though you were always to live together; you will see that when you cease to take thought for your own deliverance, God will take thought for you; and when you cease to help yourself eagerly, He will help you.”

St. Francis de Sales, 1567-1622

Lars’ Ramblings— From the Cove

Is it not satisfying to run into folks we haven’t seen for a while? Even if a name can’t be called up, at least the face is recognizable. So it was one day at a shopping center. Elisabeth was off somewhere while I just strolled about. As I turned into another section of the mall, I thought I saw a man walking towards me. “Oh, now, I know him—at least he looks familiar.” He was coming nearer and directly towards me as I walked on. “Surely I know him. Now what’s his name?” A few more steps and I stopped in my tracks—and he stopped. Then truth

dawned. I had been walking towards a partial mirrored wall. I took another good look and then remarked in a soft voice, "Boy, have you gotten old." And I walked on.

That reminds me of the little fellow who came with his mother to a seminar. He knew the voice of the lady that he listened to on weekdays on the radio together with his mother and now he was to meet her. The two came to the booktable where Elisabeth was sitting. The mother made the introduction as the boy stood gazing into the speaker's face, and exclaimed in utter shock, "Is *that* Elisabeth Elliot?!" I only wish that I could have seen the picture he had drawn of her in his mind.

Speaking of pictures, Elisabeth has always tried to keep publicity photos fairly current to preserve some semblance of reality to what people would see when she arrived at an engagement. Coming once to a church to speak, she looked for someone who was in charge. A lady approached her and Elisabeth introduced herself. "Are you Elisabeth Elliot? My, you certainly look a lot older than your picture."

So we may have a reflection of ourselves which is pretty fractured, perhaps at times unrecognizable, as I experienced. Some form an image from afar and find that the imagined one is better than the real person. Coming face-to-face with reality, some find that the reproduction would have been

more enjoyable. For some reason, this makes me think of seeing "through a glass darkly." What will that day be like when our true selves are known? A joyful anticipation? Yes, but with some trepidation perhaps; do we want our true selves to be known?

An under-20-year-old stopped Elisabeth once in an aisle and asked in a very solemn voice, "Tell me, who is the real Elisabeth Elliot?"

"Only God knows, and may God preserve me from ever finding out," answered EE. I agree. It seems to me that I know just enough about myself to make me uneasy and at the same time remind me of my dire need of mercy and grace.

That's it from the Cove.

Summer 2003 Travel Schedule

Check for last-minute engagements online at www.elisabethelliott.org

August 10 5:00 P.M., Southhampton, L.I., New York. for more information, call Mary Ellen Horcher at 631-283-0656.

August 24 Alton Bay, N.H. Alton Bay Christian Conference Center. For information, call (603)875-6161 or write info@abccc.org.

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