



Pages for All Ages: Opening Up to God

by Mary Klein

Some words and phrases to know before you read

- stay aware
- testament
- devotion
- Presence
- Evangelical
- scholarship
- philosophy
- mysticism
- master’s degree, PhD
- frantically
- despair
- dedication
- burdens
- Nazi Germany
- inner persuasions
- particular
- straining and striving

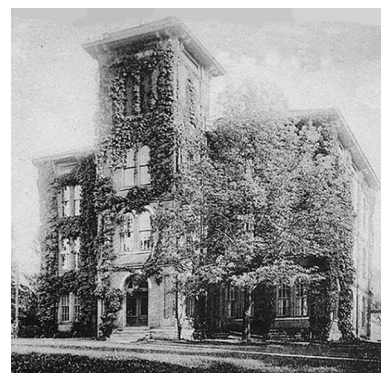
“Contemplatives” are people who believe that the most important thing in life is to try to stay aware of God. They have two main ways of doing this – prayer and contemplation. “Prayer” means trying to actively communicate with God. “Contemplation” means spending time in serious, quiet thought.

Today, many contemplatives love the book *A Testament of Devotion* by Thomas Kelly. It is a short collection of essays by a Quaker who was definitely *not* a contemplative for most of his life. Kelly spent most of his life in such great busyness that the busyness finally broke him. During his breakdown, he felt embraced by a great Presence. He spent the last three years of his life teaching people about his new devotion to that Presence. He spoke with such power and clarity that many people felt changed by his words. Kelly died suddenly from a heart attack at the age of forty-seven. A few months later, his family and friends collected his writings – lecture notes, public talks, and essays – and turned them into the book *A Testament of Devotion*.



Thomas Kelly was born into an Evangelical Quaker farm family in Ohio in 1893. These were not contemplative, silent Quakers. They were singing, preaching, praising Quakers in Londonderry Monthly Meeting. Kelly’s

grandfather had helped start that meeting, and Kelly’s parents and aunts and uncles kept it going. One of the games that the children liked to play was “meeting,” and Thomas Kelly usually played the preacher.



When Kelly was four, his father, Carlton, died from sudden internal bleeding. His mother, Madora, kept the family on their farm until Thomas was ten. Then she took him and his sister to live in Wilmington, Ohio, where Madora’s parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and cousins were active in Wilmington Yearly Meeting. The yearly meeting had a good high school and college, and Thomas Kelly graduated from both. Farm life had been a bit lonely for Kelly, so the lively community of Wilmington made him feel like his life had really begun.

Kelly was known for pranks and jokes all through his childhood and into his college years. He would speed around the college campus on his motorcycle, yelling, “Oh, boy! Oh, boy!” He got into trouble with his friends. But he was serious about his schoolwork. He wanted to be one of the best in his class. He was also serious about keeping the Religious Society of Friends





strong. He worked hard to start a Young Friends Movement during his college years.

Finally, though, Wilmington started to feel too small to Kelly. He graduated from Wilmington College in 1913 and got a scholarship to study at Haverford in Philadelphia. Kelly felt like he was moving up in the world – into a bigger city, full of important monthly meetings, and into a bigger college, full of important Quakers. The Quaker who became most important to Kelly then was Rufus Jones. Kelly studied philosophy with Jones and learned about mysticism from him. Kelly learned that the Evangelical Quakers of his childhood were not the only kind of Quaker. He decided to work for a master’s degree in philosophy at Haverford.

Over the years, Kelly kept getting the feeling that he needed to be someplace bigger and doing something more important. He got married and had two children, and the family moved many times during the next twenty years. They left some colleges only to return to them later, then left again – Wilmington College, Hartford College, Earlham College, Harvard University, Wellesley College, University of Hawaii, and Haverford College.

In 1937, Kelly was working frantically to complete a second PhD. He had one PhD from Hartford College, and he wanted another one from Harvard. He had been working on this second PhD for seven years. He had borrowed a lot of money to pay for his Harvard tuition. He was working extra jobs to pay for his family’s living expenses, and this put the family under a lot of stress.

When the time came for Kelly to take the final step in earning his PhD from Harvard, he froze. That final step was to meet with a group of professors and “defend” a long paper he had written. They would ask him hard questions about his work, and he was supposed to answer them. But he couldn’t do it. His mind just went blank. This had happened during his first PhD, also, but the professors at Hartford had given him a second chance. He got no second chance from Harvard.

Kelly felt ruined. His wife and friends worried that he might try to kill himself. But instead, something amazing happened. He described this in a letter to his

wife a few months later. He said that in his darkest time of despair, he felt “an *opening up* . . . a new sense of . . . childlike dedication to God . . . I was much shaken by the experience of Presence – something I did not seek, but that *sought* me . . . And it takes away the old self-seeking, self-centered self, . . . [which has] laid heavy burdens on you, dear one.”



After that, Kelly was changed, and he kept changing. He traveled among Quakers in Nazi Germany that summer and grew to understand that the inward Presence leads to outward good. In a lecture to German Friends, he explained, “The suffering of the world is a part, too, of the life of God . . . We cannot carry *all* burdens, . . . [but by] inner persuasions, [God] draws us to a few very definite tasks, *our* tasks, God’s burdened heart [puts particular] burdens in us.”

These words, like all of Thomas Kelly’s published words, encourage us not to burn out, not to give up, not to despair. Kelly knew what he was talking about. He had lived a life of straining and striving for too long. Then he left that way of life behind him. He agreed instead to live a life of childlike devotion to God.

- Think of a time when everything seemed to be going wrong for you. What made things feel better?
- What are some ways you see people helping each other get through hard times?
- What does “the Light” mean to you?

Photos: Thomas Kelly, Wilmington College Hall, some prisoners of the Nazis in 1938.

