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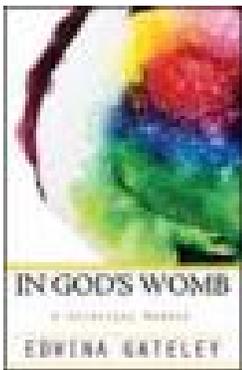
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Edwina Gateley's Big God

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

I've known and admired Edwina Gateley for years, and even had the privilege of speaking at various church events with her, most memorably, a week-long teach-in together in Olympia, Washington, seven years ago. She's a spell-binding speaker, heroic church woman, devoted mother, great writer, amazing story teller, brilliant organizer and good friend. I cherish her wit and wisdom; most of all, she cheers me up and gives me new energy to carry on our work of peace and justice.



But reading her newly published spiritual memoir, *In God's Womb* (Orbis Books,

2009), I realize how far I underestimate her. She's a mystic, a living saint in our midst. Many church men fear her. Most simply do not understand her. Reading this book helps explain why: Edwina is committed to God. Her mission springs from and leads to a passionate love of God. And because her God is so big, because she speaks with authority, she threatens the powers that be.

In God's Womb is a readable, inviting, and amazing testimony of one of the many great churchwomen of our times.

She writes: "One of the questions most frequently asked of me is: 'Why are you still a member of the

Roman Catholic church? Why are you still working full time in the church?" Where has her motivation and passion come from? Not from musty books, she says, and not from hard theology. "It has come from my experience of God, something over which I really have not had much control. ..."

Her experience of God begins early, as a teenager in England. While her friends expended their youthful energy on the playing fields of Lancaster, Edwina ensconced herself in the cavernous Lancaster Cathedral, "God's Womb," she calls it. There in solitude she sat, "absolutely fascinated by the sense of mystery and awe. ..." And now, looking back, she expresses some measure of surprise -- she was already a contemplative at the age of 13.

The contemplative urge never deserted her. Well into her adulthood it rose again, and off she went for a three-month stay at a hermitage in the Sahara desert of Algeria. "It was," she says,

a very rich and deep experience, one that increased my sense of belonging to God and being deeply loved... . I came to know, with a great certainty, that God longs to comfort us and to assure us that, no matter what we have done, where we have been, or even how we have lived -- we will never be abandoned or excluded from God's embrace.

And from this, things unfolded. Out of the richness of contemplation, from her passionate love of God, sprang her relentless sense of mission, to love and serve others and lead them to that Great Love.

She graduated from college in 1961 then off she went to Africa to serve the poorest of the poor. And as is often the case, in that mysterious reversal of roles, the poor tendered the greater service.

In Africa, my understanding of God changed because of the hospitality, generosity and openness of the African people. Their notion of God seemed to be so much bigger than what I had learned from my Church at home. I learned that we are suffused with God.

Back in England, inspired by Vatican II, she founded the Volunteer Missionary Movement, an organization of lay Catholics dispatched to the very poor around the world.

How to fund the nascent organization? How to staff it, how to furnish it? She prayed for it, and believed in it. And soon news came to her of an idle 30-room house, owned by the church, on four acres of land near London. She mustered her boldness and approached the cardinal. Would he turn it over to her -- for free?

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There was some balking and skepticism. But against long odds, she held her ground. Then finally word came down. Yes. Before long, some 500 volunteers -- men and women, married and single, young and old -- fanned out across the globe, to serve the poor in 26 countries on five continents.

By the 1980s, changes were in store, and she moved to Chicago, studying at Catholic Theological Union and ministering in the inner city, and in particular, to prostitutes. "The streets of Chicago became my church," she says.

My congregation was made up of the winos, the drug addicts, the homeless, and the prostitutes. Every encounter, every moment spent sitting in the bars, the brothels, the streets, and the shelters became, for me, eucharistic events. I knew that God was there.

Eventually, she started Genesis House, a house of hospitality for prostitutes, a safe haven where women could turn their lives around and reclaim their dignity.

Today, a resident of Erie, Pa., she is a missionary to U.S. churchgoers, and an encouragement to thousands of women, and even some men. She hits the road, tells stories, shares the Gospel, proclaims God's Great Love -- and returns home to her adopted son Niall.

"Is God ever satisfied?" she asks, pondering her winding path. "No. God is a great seducer -- ever inviting us deeper into the journey."

And as our journeys deepen, she says, light is cast outwardly. Our spirituality is never ours to own. "Spirituality and justice are inseparable," she says. "Prayer and ritual without a life committed to justice, peace, and the elimination of poverty is a sham."

As wars escalated, poverty deepened, violence grew, and injustice continued unabated in our world, I increasingly came to feel that the Christian church and we Christian people were failing abysmally in our calling to bring about the realm of God. It was, therefore, natural and imperative that in all my public speaking I would call for personal and global transformation."

Reading her beautiful memoir, I realized that what provokes so much resistance to Edwina's witness is her grand concept of God. Edwina's God is large indeed, one who has no need to draw boundaries, one radically nonjudgmental, a God large enough to embrace everyone -- unconditionally, wildly, nonviolently, universally.

Need it be said, here is a God not amenable to egotism or manipulation or control. Here is a God more concerned with the outcast than with august cathedrals and pomp and circumstance, a God who distains empires and riches and grandeur, who welcomes the lost and lowly, the loving and peaceful and powerless. All of us.

If we admit her concept of God -- and of course she's pointing to the God of Jesus, Mary and the saints -- then self-righteousness, judgment, domination and control are banished. "I know," she says, "that God welcomes all people... ."

The deeper we enter into the journey, the bigger God becomes -- until we reach the stage where we no longer have any names or definitions for God. God is. We can only stand in awe before God's amazing love... God's love is far beyond our comprehension. We cannot even begin to sound the depth and breadth of this love for each single one of us and for all of creation. It is a love that takes precedence over all else, and must be fundamental to our call as Christians. This, I believe, was the message of Jesus and one which, clearly, we seem to be having a hard time embracing.

Edwina's testimony of this God of universal love pushes us to practice universal, nonviolent love, which entails setting out, like Edwina, on the journey of selfless service to those in need, working for justice for the poor, resisting empire, ending war, making peace and practicing infinite compassion. Edwina makes God's love contagious.

In God's Womb is a beautiful little book, soon to be a spiritual classic, I think, and a testimony to one of the great churchwoman of our times. I urge you to get it and let Edwina's wisdom wash over you. If possible, get to one of her lectures, conferences or retreats, and try to emulate her big spirit. Her book,

like her life and witness, will make you want to know that big God, that Great Love, all over again.

For further information on Edwina Gateley, see: www.edwinagateley.com

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This week, John Dear will speak in Salt Lake City, Utah, on Sunday night, and in Bellingham, Washington for the International World Peace Day march and rally on Monday. His latest books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down Your Sword*, as well as Patricia Normile's *John Dear On Peace*, are available from www.amazon.com For further information, see: www.johndear.org

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