

Thomas R. Kelly
(1893-1941)

Thomas Raymond Kelly was born into a devout Quaker farm family living near Chillicothe, Ohio. His father died when he was quite small, and young Kelly grew up helping his mother, grandmother, and sister with the farm operations. In 1903 the family moved to Wilmington, Ohio, which gave Kelly a chance to attend high school and Wilmington College, a small Quaker school. From there Kelly earned a scholarship to Haverford College, where a significant pilgrimage began.

Originally attracted to the sciences, Kelly now found himself drawn to philosophy and religion. Under the teaching of Rufus Jones, Kelly encountered a different kind of Quakerism than he had known in the Midwest, one that focused on the mystical life. Soon he came to believe that this mystical Quaker life was closer to the original vision of George Fox. Yet the mystical experience eluded him.

Through many years of teaching and study, Kelly, who became a Ph.D. candidate at Harvard working under the world-renowned British mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, labored for recognition. He was torn by differences in Quakerism, suffered ill health, and was pained by the repeated refusals of Harvard to allow him to complete the Ph.D.

Finally, out of this crucible of failure and pain, a new Thomas Kelly arose, one who genuinely floated in the grace of God with a simple and childlike obedience and trust. This renewed Thomas Kelly is the one whose teaching and example have gained wide attention. Yet all of Kelly's works represent a reaching for the same simple and pure devotional understanding.

In the following selection, which is taken from his masterwork, *A Testament of Devotion*, notice that he suggests some will be swept into holy obedience and some will have to wrestle for it. Also take note of the beautiful language he uses to describe this spiritual gift.

A TESTAMENT OF DEVOTION

The Shepherd in Search of Lost Obedience

Out in front of us is the drama of men and of nations, seething, struggling, laboring, dying. Upon this tragic drama in these days our eyes are all set in anxious watchfulness and in prayer. But within the silences of the souls of men an eternal drama is ever being enacted, in these days as well as in others. And on the outcome of this inner drama rests, ultimately, the outer pageant of history... It is the drama of the lost sheep wandering in the wilderness, restless and lonely, feebly searching, while over the hills comes the wiser Shepherd. For His is a shepherd's heart, and He is restless until He holds His sheep in His arms...

It is to one strand in this inner drama, one scene, where the Shepherd has found His sheep, that I would direct you. It is the life of absolute and complete and holy obedience to the voice of the Shepherd. But ever throughout the account the accent will be laid upon God, God the initiator, God the aggressor, God the seeker, God the stirrer into life, God the ground of our obedience, God the giver of the power to become children of God...

The Tender Persuading Love at the Center

In considering one gateway into this life of holy obedience, let us dare to venture together into the inner sanctuary of the soul, where God meets man in awful immediacy...

It is an overwhelming experience to fall into the hands of the living God, to be invaded to the depths of one's being by His presence, to be, without warning, wholly uprooted from all earth-born securities and assurances, and to be blown by a tempest of unbelievable power which leaves one's old proud self utterly, utterly defenseless, until one cries, "All Thy waves and thy billows are gone over me" (Ps. 42:7). Then is the soul swept into a Loving Center of ineffable sweetness, where calm and unspeakable peace and ravishing joy steal over one. And one knows now why Pascal wrote, in the center of his greatest moment, the single word, "Fire." There stands the world of struggling, sinful, earth-blinded men and nations, of plants and animals and wheeling stars of heaven, all new, all lapped in the tender, persuading Love at the Center. There stand the saints of the ages, their hearts open to view, and lo, their hearts are our heart and their hearts are the heart of the Eternal One. In awful solemnity the Holy One is over all and in all, exquisitely loving, infinitely patient, tenderly smiling. Marks of glory are upon all things, and the marks are cruciform and blood-stained. And one sighs, like the convinced Thomas of old, "My Lord and my God" (John 20.28). Dare one lift one's eyes and look? Nay, whither can one look and not see Him? For field and stream and teeming streets are full of Him. Yet as Moses knew, no

man can look on God and live – live as his old self. Death comes, blessed death, death of one's alienating will. And one knows what Paul meant when he wrote, "The life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God" (Gal. 2:20).

Emerging into Obedience

One emerges from such soul-shaking, Love-invaded times into more normal states of consciousness. But one knows ever after that the Eternal Lover of the world, the Hound of Heaven, is utterly, utterly real, and that life must henceforth be forever determined by that Real. Like Saint Augustine one asks not for greater certainty of God but only for more steadfastness in Him. There, beyond, in Him is the true Center, and we are reduced, as it were, to nothing, for He is all...

Self is emptied into God, and God in-fills it. In glad, amazed humility we cast on Him our little lives in trusting obedience, in erect, serene, and smiling joy. And we say, with a writer of Psalms, "Lo, I come: in the book of the law it is written of me, I delight to do Thy will, O my God" (40:7-8). For nothing else in all of heaven or earth counts so much as His will, His slightest wish, His faintest breathing. And holy obedience sets in, sensitive as a shadow, obedient as a shadow, selfless as a shadow... Gladly, urgently, promptly one leaps to do His bidding, ready to run and not be weary and to walk and not faint.

Passive or Active?

Do not mistake me. Our interest just now is in the life of complete obedience to God, not in amazing revelations of His glory graciously granted only to some. Yet the amazing experiences of the mystics leave a permanent residue, a God-subdued, a God-possessed will. States of consciousness are fluctuating. The vision fades. But holy and listening and alert obedience remains, as the core and kernel of a God-intoxicated life, as the abiding pattern of sober, workaday living. And some are led into the state of complete obedience by this well-nigh passive route, wherein God alone seems to be the actor and we seem to be wholly acted upon. And our wills are melted and dissolved and made pliant, being firmly fixed in Him, and He wills in us.

But in contrast to this passive route to complete obedience most people must follow what Jean-Nicholas Grou calls the active way, wherein we must struggle and, like Jacob of old, wrestle with the angel until the morning dawns, the active way wherein the will must be subjected bit by bit, piecemeal and progressively, to the divine Will.

The Flaming Vision

But the first step to... obedience... is the flaming vision of the wonder of such a life, a vision which comes occasionally to us all, through biographies of the saints, through the journals of Fox and early Friends, through a life lived before our eyes, through a haunting verse of the Psalms – "Whom have I in heaven but Thee? And there is none upon earth that I desire beside Thee" (Ps. 73:25) – through meditation upon the amazing life and death of Jesus, through a flash of illumination or, in Fox's language, a great opening... There is an infinite fountain of lifting power, pressing within us, luring us by dazzling visions, and we can only say, The creative God comes into our souls. An increment of infinity is about us. Holy is imagination, the gateway of Reality into our hearts. The Hound of Heaven is on our track, the God of Love is wooing us to His Holy life.

Begin Where You Are

Once having the vision, the second step to holy obedience is this: Begin where you are. Obey now. Use what little obedience you are capable of, even if it be like a grain of mustard seed. Begin where you are. Live this present moment, this present hour as you now sit in your seats, in utter, utter submission and openness toward Him. Listen outwardly to these words, but within, behind the scenes, in the deeper levels of your lives where you are all alone with God the Loving Eternal One, keep up a silent prayer. "Open Thou my life. Guide my thoughts where I dare not let them go. But Thou darest. Thy will be done." Walk on the streets and chat with your friends, offering yourselves in continuous obedience. I find this internal continuous prayer life absolutely essential. It can be carried on day and night, in the thick of business, in home and school. Such prayer of submission can be so simple. It is well to use a single sentence, repeated over and over and over again, such as this: "Be Thou my will. Be Thou my will," or "I open all before Thee. I open all before Thee," or "See earth through heaven. See earth through heaven." This hidden prayer life can pass, in time, beyond words and phrases into mere ejaculations, "My God, my God, my Holy One, my Love," or into the adoration of the Upanishad, "O Wonderful, O Wonderful, O Wonderful." Words may cease and one stands and walks and sits and lies in wordless attitudes of adoration and submission and rejoicing and exultation and glory.

Begin Again and Relax

And the third step in holy obedience, or a counsel, is this: if you slip and stumble and forget God for an hour, and assert your old proud self, and rely upon your own clever wisdom, don't

spend too much time in anguished regrets and self-accusations but begin again, just where you are.

Yet a fourth consideration in holy obedience is this: Don't grit your teeth and clench your fists and say, "I will! I will!" Relax. Take hands off. Submit yourself to God. Learn to live in the passive voice – a hard saying for Americans – and let life be willed through you. For "I will" spells not obedience.

BIBLE SELECTION

Psalm 23 (NRSV)

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
 He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
 he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths
 for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
 I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
 your rod and your staff –
 they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me
 in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
 my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
 all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
 my whole life long.

BREATH PRAYER

(Inhale) "The LORD is my shepherd ..."

(Exhale) "... I shall not want."

Try it this way: Breathe in to entrust yourself to Jesus...

Breathe out to let go of wanting _____.

JOURNAL QUESTIONS

1. In your view, does Thomas Kelly seem to be reaching for an impossible ideal? Alternatively, do you believe that his concept of "holy obedience" is accessible to everyone? Why or why not?
2. What steps can you take to live in holy obedience?
3. Optional Stretch Exercise: Experiment with Quaker-style prayer either in the company of friends, a spouse, or in quiet solitude. Begin in silence, allowing each individual to speak as inspired by the Spirit, without the need for a structured turn-taking. Embrace the movement of the Spirit and the awakening of God in hearts. Grant extended periods of silence, resisting the urge for excessive speech. Surrender to God's guidance. Conclude the session with each person departing as they feel led.

REFLECTIONS FROM RICHARD J. FOSTER

Virtually all of Kelly's published writings, apart from his Ph.D. dissertation, come from the last three years of his life. I have read a good number of his unpublished sermons and lectures from before this period, and while they are far above the average in insight and scholarship, they simply do not rise to the same level of breathtaking radiance as those last three years. Why is this? What happened in 1937-38 to cause the speeches and essays of his final years to erupt with such fire and heart-searing passion? What made him so utterly "blinded by the splendor of God"? What would cause him to write, "The fires of the love of God, of our love toward God, and of His love toward us, are very hot"? Did God visit him in some kind of special epiphany of glory? Quite the contrary. The abrupt and glorious change in Kelly arose out of two powerful experiences: the one a crushing personal defeat, the other a fiery baptism into the suffering of humanity.

By 1924 Kelly had earned a Ph.D. in philosophy from Hartford Theological Seminary, and by 1936 he was teaching at the prestigious Haverford College. Even so, he longed for the scholarly recognition of a Harvard Ph.D., and so he pursued this second doctorate at great personal cost, both financially and physically. Finally, he completed all of his doctoral requirements except for the final oral exams. But in the fall of 1937 on the day Kelly went in for his orals he had one of his occasional and dreadful "woozy spells," and his mind went complete blank. He failed his orals miserably and was rejected for the Ph.D. with no opportunity of reconsideration. The rejection was catastrophic. Kelly sunk into deep depression. And yet, out of the ashes of this dashed dream of academic acclaim arose the phoenix of a new, captivating vision of "the God-intoxicated life." In April 1938 he wrote to Rufus Jones, "The reality of Presence has been very great at times recently. One knows at first hand what the old inquiry meant, 'Has Truth been advancing among you?'"

The second experience came in the summer of 1938 when Kelly went to Hitler's Germany, an experience in which his soul was immeasurably deepened by seeing and sharing in the suffering of the German people. "I have never had such a soul-overturning... period as this," he wrote. "It is not merely heroism, it is depth of consecration, simplicity of faith, beauty in the midst of poverty or suffering, that shames us. I have met some giant souls... One can't be the same again." Upon returning to Haverford he kept repeating to Douglas Steere, "It is wonderful. I have been literally melted down by the love of God." Later he told several close students of a particular experience in the great cathedral at Cologne where, on his knees, he seemed to feel God laying upon his heart the whole congealed

suffering of humanity – a burden too terrible to be borne – and yet somehow bearable with God's help.

These two experiences help us understand the enormous power that flowed from Kelly's writing and speaking in the three remaining years of his earthly pilgrimage.

Excerpts taken from *Spiritual Classics: Selected Readings on the Twelve Spiritual Disciplines* (Richard Foster and Emilie Griffin, Editors. Harpercollins, 2000.)