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An interview with Elizabeth Thompson

Elizabeth Thompson was born in 1913 in Birmingham, Michigan where her roots reach far back. Her great-great-grandfather arrived there in 1832 before it became a state. She came to California as a young woman, married and raised three children. Elizabeth is a wonderfully inspiring, open minded and open hearted woman and is gracious in sharing her wisdom and unique perspectives on life. Derek Larson and I joined her in her home recently where she fed us sherry and delicious snacks and told us about some of the things she's come to understand in her long and eventful life.

Hannah: Can you tell us about some period or episode of your life when you experienced some sort of journey? Whatever comes to mind.

Elizabeth: I started on a journey about 91 years ago (laughs). I've always felt as though my life is a journey. I didn't put it in those terms when I was young but a part of me always took things like God very seriously. Heaven and hell were to be considered. When I was about two years old my great grandmother died and I remember lying on my back, looking up at the sky where I had heard heaven was. When I saw a cloud that sort of looked like a foot I thought well, there's Grandma's foot sticking out of heaven.

H: So you feel like you've been on a continuous spiritual path?

E: Yes. Of course I didn't always define it as that but I have a feeling that there's something here, something in it: a path or direction. Life means something and I've had that sense for a long time.

H: What do you mean when you say it means something?

E: Well that it's not like we're just here and so what, snuff in and snuff out. Early on I felt as if God had his eye on me, seeing that I was going in the right direction. In my child-

hood bedroom there was a long closet that had clothes in the front and the rest was storage. At night, an angel stood in that closet—it was my Guardian Angel. He helped God check up on me. I was always in their sights so I had to watch out what I did.

H: Could you see the angel?

E: No, I just imagined it. I saw it in my mind's eye. But I quite believed that. I also had the other side—My father used to make home brew and wine in the cellar back in those days. The fermenting process gave off a strange odor. My father said, "It smells like the devil down there", and I thought, "Oh, so that's what the devil smells like."

We lived by the railroad and the train would go by at night and I could feel the vibrations. My bed would shake. I thought the devil was squatting at the foot of my bed, shaking it. I had all of these characters keeping track of me.

H: Has there ever been a time in your life when you felt like you were off from your journey?

E: I was very Presbyterian, mind you. I grew up in a Presbyterian church and took it very seriously. I didn't believe everything that they told me, but thought that I

should. Then I started to doubt their beliefs during the 2nd world war because they said that we had to stand behind our country and support the war. I didn't think that was what Christianity was. I was quite upset about that so I stopped going to church. Around this time I met my husband Gene who was not an Athiest but he was certainly not a conformist, either. He found much of theology absurd. So I got into his thing and while I can't say I actually shook off religion, I did have a different focus on it. I knew it was there but I got into his viewpoint and didn't think about it much. Then later when things got bad in our marriage and he started drinking, I had all kinds of problems I hadn't had before. One of my friends said to me, "Don't you believe in God?" and I thought, "Yes, yes I do." It was a rescuing thought.

That jolted me back. It was a big help and I needed a lot of help about then. As time went on I felt as though I were back on the road. I tried going to different churches but couldn't get into them. Since my situation became less painful, I got lazy about my spiritual life. But there was always a feeling that there was something I should be doing, that I should be paying attention. I felt discontented. The ten years that Gene's alcoholism raged were so dreadful that I felt as if I were in a tunnel and normal life was passing me by. When I finally emerged I had learned a lot—some of it that I didn't want to know.

H: What kind of things didn't you want to know?

E: (Laughs) Like what it was like to be utterly broke. What it's like not being able to find the person you love despite the fact that he's sitting right there in front of you. Mr. Hyde was impossible to have anything to do with, but also impossible to get free from. All that stuff. People who are associated with acoholics know about this. It's interesting to go to an AI Anon meeting. Most of the attenders aren't very interested in normal, healthy people because the alcoholics are so much more alive in some ways. They're sensitive and troubled people. When you're living with them you're under the pressure of all of this life, this turmoil. It's very stressful. But it also means something, whether bad or good. So it was not fun, it was anything but fun. But after I got out of it I could see that life had a much bigger canvas than before. My awareness was much deeper and wider than it had been and I had a lot more feelings than I had been able to feel before.

H: In the time of your long life you must have experienced a lot of loss. How do you deal with the loss of so many loved ones?

E: Yes, practically everybody in my world, the world of my earlier life is gone now. It was very sad, losing all the people. Losing my grandparents, my aunts and uncles, all the various members of my family and so, so many friends. My mother's death just about killed me. I was very close to her. I think it's a shock to most of us to have that basic person disappear. I felt a loss I had never dreamed of. But it also wakes you up to other dimensions. I don't know about afterlife, or reincarnation, any of that stuff. I don't believe any of it, but I don't not believe, either. Who knows? It's a mystery way beyond me. When you lose someone close to you, you go through such tremendous things. My son died when he was 27 years old. That was almost a death

blow for me and for all of our family. It was terrible. It's strange, you think you can never live through something like that...but you do. You don't have a choice. It's hard to say, but life gets another dimension. More than one dimension, maybe. Things become different and you see things you never would've seen before. Life gets richer—it's more terrible and more wonderful.

H: I love the way you phrase that. Do you feel that in the last ten years of your life the challenges are any different from what they were for the first eighty? Is your focus different?

E: It's quite different. For one thing, I worry about very little. Terrible things happen but they've happened before and they'll happen again. We lived through it or we died in it, whatever. We get used to the fact that that's life, that's all. No use getting upset about it. I rarely, if ever, get my feelings hurt now. If someone is unkind, I think they don't mean to be, or they're reacting to their conception of me, not to me, myself. But these things just naturally come about if you go on living and it seems...I almost hesitate to say anything about this because it's so important and one wouldn't want to trivialize it, but the meaning and the power of love is what it's all about. Overused word, but it's so important. You really see like you never saw before what it means. All my regrets for my life are for when my love failed. Love isn't just what you thought it was when you were young. It's everything. It's so large and so omnipresent. It's real, beautiful, so painful and so wonderful. Love gets more real as you get older.

H: So you're free of the minutia of worry and stress?

E: Well, not entirely, but it's much easier to say "so what?" There's a lot I should do that I don't do and so what? Most of those are unimportant. The important thing is no to let anything squeeze me down, make me small, make me forget.

Talking about love has broad applications. It makes me want to talk about visiting with these guys who have problems, the men in prison. They're in there for all kinds of reasons. It has surprised me to find how much I can care for those people, what a connection I have to them. I love them. It's strange. There's one whom I suspect of being a sex offender, yet I feel warmth for him. I said to Eric Corson who runs PVS, "I never thought I'd feel tender toward a sex offender!" (laughs) But it's easy these days. Certainly easier than when I was younger. You get broader, wiser, more accepting. You see that all of us are really running, struggling and falling everywhere all the time. Even in the terrible things, you know God's there somewhere. I don't know what it all is. It just is.

H: Has your experience of God become more powerful?

E: Yes. I've been reading a book by Rufus Jones with the unlikely title *Spiritual Reformers of the 16th and 17th Centuries*. He pares away so much of the incrustations from my perceptions. It says that love is another word for God, but leaves one awed by the immensity, the unspeakable Something. I couldn't say it, I couldn't tell you what I think I know. It's just too large and too mysterious.

Carl Jung, when asked if he believed in God, is reported to have answered, "I don't believe. I know." Me, too.