

AST

Robin Paris interviews Beth Hapgood -- May 22, 1989

Robin The first question I have for you, Beth, is how it was that you came to be the custodian of that marvelous place, 88 Main Street.

Beth Which dimension do you want it on?

Robin Actually I would like it on both dimensions.

Beth On the first dimension, the earthy dimension. By then we had five children. I had said: no more living in New York City underground on the Lower East Side. Absolutely out of the question. The kids were sick all the time. We had gone to Petersham, where my mother's summer house was, and had insulated off two or three rooms. It was a real summer house, not winterized at all. It was during that winter that Tina was born. I was all alone in the Petersham house, the winter of 1951-52. Tina was born around Christmas time of '51. My husband would come up every few weeks to visit.

Sometimes we would go over to Athol where the F.O.R (Fellowship of Reconciliation) was holding meetings. A minister in Athol named Torrey was running discussions in, which was dependent totally on the munitions business, on what on earth would happen if peace were to break out at any moment. It would be an economic disaster. Let's think about that, said he. It was in that discussion group that we met Monroe and Isabel Smith. The Smiths were the people who started youth hosteling in this country. It was also the same winter that we met Russell and Irene Johnson. He was the regional secretary for the A.F.S.C. (American Friends Service Committee of New England). He took speakers around the area, planned conferences, and the like. When Monroe and Isabel looked at the two couples, they said: why don't you move to Northfield and start a conference center there. That's how we came to Northfield.

We came originally to the house across the way, Friendship Center, a big white-columned house, which at one time had been a hotel. By then Tina was not yet walking. We moved there in the summer of 1952. We discovered somehow that there was a short-term mortgage on those two places, that was due in September. The Johnsons fled, gave it all up and went to Boston. We went across the street, at Isabel and Monroe's suggestion. We walked in that little backyard and knew it was home. We

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had that same reaction so many other people had. On the material level that is how we came to 88 Main Street in the fall of 1952.

Jonny was born the following summer. In the spring I came down with pneumonia, just before he was born. It was a really rough year. The hostel people were still coming. It was a big eighteen room house. Millions of stairs. The children were all little. They were always having epidemics, ear problems and all the things little kids have. And there was this huge space. We weren't used to that. I was used to big houses, but this kind of responsibility was new.

Robin Your husband was still in New York?

Beth He came up somewhere along the line, with a one-year appointment to UMass. He was working on his doctorate. Essentially he was living in New York. He always loved New York. So I was alone a great deal. When he came up he loved it. He would do things and be around. Then he would be back in New York. He stayed down there quite a bit.

Robin I can remember from my own life the beginning of my awakening in this life. Over the period of many years, of course I have been able to trace it more thoroughly as a pattern over the course of many lifetimes. In this life, think back now a long time to when you were a child. I would like to know is where you were, and what kind of stories surrounded the beginning of your awakening. Generally that is in the teenage years with most people. What kinds of things were happening for you? What observations were you making? I can remember the observations in New York City that really showed me something was not right.

Beth Yes, me too. I grew up in New York City. We always from the time I was about two went to the country for the summer. To me Petersham was home. New York was never home. I can remember always -- from the vantage point of today it feels like always -- having this very deep kind of love of God, the wonder of life, the sense of beauty. I would always go out in the woods to roam, and things like that. On that level, it seems that has always been there. My name Elizabeth means dedicated to God, which has turned out to be very appropriate. I cannot remember when that was not the cornerstone of my life.

I know the serve motivation, in terms of interest in what makes people tick, has always been there too. I can remember way back in my years in school, which was an experimental school run by Teachers College



at Columbia University. My father insisted upon that. I always, for as far back as I can remember, had the lame ducks under my wing. The shy person. The person who had to go to the hospital. I was always somehow running around taking care of people. I also got to know the teachers very well.

By the time I was fifteen or so, I can remember marching in a parade on Fifth Avenue, singing the Internationale Forever. Going to mass meetings on the steps of Columbia University, when Jimmy Wechsler was there. So that kind of strand has been in my life. It is also very much a Hapgood trait, that comes down through the Hapgood consciousness for generations. That is a whole story in itself.

Robin You have lived through a major war on the planet.

Beth Oh yes. I was conceived in war torn Europe during the First World War.

Robin Where were you during the Second World War?

Beth I was in Europe in 1938 on a bicycle. I was in college during those years 1936 to 1940. The fall of '40 I went to New York to attend the Rochdale Institute, which is where I met Bob St. Clair.

Robin What kinds of things were happening in college in people's minds then?

Beth I have always felt as though a lot of what was going on was inside of me. There weren't a lot of people to talk with.

Robin Do you remember the war having any serious kind of impact on you?

Beth Oh yes. I was over there in 1938, which was between the Anschluss and the Sudetenland. I knew people. My mother was a translator. Our home was an open home. So I knew the refugees who were coming over.

Robin Where were you in Europe?

Beth Across Germany, France and Holland, and Denmark. I had grown up hearing foreign languages at home and meeting people. In those days it