

# **Eleanor S. Morrison, Early Sexuality Educator/ Educadora de Sexualidad Temprana**

## **1. Getting to Know You/Aprendiendo a conocerte**



Name/Nombre: Eleanor Shelton Morrison

Career/Carrera: Higher Education; Pastor;  
Author/Educación  
Universitaria; Pastora;  
Autora

A. B. Recipient/A. B. honor: 1991

Birthday/Cumpleaños: May/Mayo 21, 1921

Place of birth/Lugar de nacimiento:  
Stonega, Virginia

Hair Color/Color de cabello: Flaxen blond/Rubio claro

Eyes/Color de ojos: Blue/Azul

Siblings/Hermanos o hermanas: One brother/Un hermano

My place in the order of birth/  
Mi lugar en el orden de nacimiento:  
First born/Primera en  
nacer

Favorite class/Clase favorita: English/Inglés

Hobbies/Pasatiempos: Roller skating; relay race  
in school/Patinar; carrera  
de relevo en la escuela

When by myself, I enjoy/Cuando estoy sola me gusta:  
Reading/Leer

My friends and I/Mis amigos y amigas y yo:  
Enjoyed outdoor games.  
Girls and boys did not do  
things together in those  
days./Disfrutábamos los

juegos al aire libre. En esos tiempos, las niñas y los niños no hacían cosas en conjunto.

I looked up to/Yo admiro a:

Schoolteachers, piano teachers, my parents/Mis maestros y maestras de la escuela y de las clases de piano; mis padres

My hero/Mi héroe:

FDR and that his wife was named Eleanor/FDR – el nombre de su esposa era Eleanor

## 2. A Bent for Justice

When Eleanor Shelton was fifteen, having been two grades ahead, she went to Wesleyan College in Macon, Georgia. It was about an hour and a half from Atlanta. She found the first chartered college for women nurturing. "I was only five foot one but could be on the soccer, tennis and basketball teams," she said. She majored in music and in economics and history.

In my college years, I had opportunity to meet in person Lillian Smith. She had a huge impact on my life. I was among a small group of students to spend a day with her.

Lillian Smith was the author of Strange Fruit, first published in 1944. Because this novel about an interracial couple in the south challenged segregation, it was banned at that time from libraries and schools. She was a white woman, an early spokeswoman for civil rights who served as a role model for me. She showed me that white people could be courageous agents for change.



## 3. Eleanor's Relationship with God

The God whom Eleanor learned about from her gentle, soft-spoken father was biblically based and drawn more from the Prophets. Partly because Floyd Bunyan Shelton was studious and careful, he was not a literalist. "My father somehow transferred to me his understanding of God," she said, "not as much as father but as creator and justice maker."

"Because I lived in a preacher's house," Eleanor said, "I was expected to pray and to think about what I was thankful for. My brother and I could not say the same table prayer. I did resist going to church once. It just was not acceptable."<sup>1</sup>

Her father did not believe in revivals so he would not have one in any church he served. When he became District Superintendent, the family went to the Methodist church of their choosing. "Although it turned out to be rather evangelistic," Eleanor said. "I loved the Sunday school and my seventh and eighth grade teachers."

Then a minister came who wanted the class to come to the altar and be saved. "I dutifully did that with the whole Sunday school class," she said, "all but one boy. We would go back and plead with him. Meanwhile we were singing those evangelistic hymns that my father would never sing. The boy began to cry. 'I don't believe in that,' he said. 'No, I am not going.' He had such courage and integrity to withstand the pressure of his age group and not give in just to be popular."

#### 4. Family Background

After her father's death, Eleanor and her son visited his birthplace. "It was all red clay roads way back into what they call down there a 'holler' in the Appalachians. There, pumping up and down at the well pump by a tiny frame house was my father's mother."

Her mother, Nelle Hines, grew up on a West Virginia wheat farm near the coal mines. She had five sisters and one brother. The brother stayed on the farm. "That a family way out in the country would produce two school teachers and three nurses was remarkable," she said. "My grandmother cut up old pieces of linoleum, and we slid slick-side down over the slippery, low-growing myrtle bank in front of her house. I loved it."

#### 5. Truman Morrison

Eleanor and Truman met at a Student Volunteer Movement retreat. Located in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina, the retreat was about social justice. Truman came from Birmingham, Alabama. Both were juniors in college, but Truman was three years older.

They married shortly after graduation. They were in the Chicago area for a time where Truman served as an associate pastor in a

---

<sup>1</sup> Author phone interview with Eleanor S. Morrison, December 16, 2006

Congregational Church and Eleanor did youth work. She was not ordained until their daughter and son were grown.

As her husband's preaching was mostly about social justice, he had invited to church several African Americans from the community. When they asked to join the church, Truman said, of course. This, Eleanor said, caused uproar in a town where a single street served as a line separating homes for white people and those for African Americans. Truman did not want to stay in a church where half the congregation was against him.

## 6. The Edgewood Years

As they prepared to leave that suburb, a delegation from East Lansing, Michigan, visited. They invited Truman to serve a new church start. It was an offspring of People's Church, which had grown too large. The church was founded in 1953 but would meet in a grammar school for the first few years until a new church could be built.

Today's welcome message on the East Lansing Edgewood United Church of Christ home page reads:

A CHURCH WITH A PROGRESSIVE THEOLOGICAL VOICE AND A COMMITMENT TO SOCIAL JUSTICE: AN OPEN AND AFFIRMING CHURCH, EDGEWOOD MEMBERS WORK ON A NUMBER OF PROJECTS AIMED AT WELCOMING THE LBGT COMMUNITY TO AN OPEN FAITH COMMUNITY AS WELL AS PROTESTING DISCRIMINATORY LEGISLATION.<sup>2</sup>

Melanie Morrison said her parents held much in common in their commitment to varieties of social justice.<sup>3</sup> They worked in tandem on many things but also led separate lives:

*Do you remember, Mom, when my father preached a sermon inspired by Betty Freidan's book, The Feminine Mystique? I was in junior high.*

*For that time, it was a prophetic sermon. After church, I overheard a woman saying to her husband,*

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://edgewooducc.org/church/>

<sup>3</sup> From author phone interview with the Rev. Dr. Melanie Morrison, 3 p.m. on December 20, 2006.

*"Well of course Truman would have to preach a sermon like that. Look who he's married to."*

*I witnessed your being labeled terms like militant and strident. At times, you were vilified for taking a stand.*

*You are a strong, independent human being, always with a sense of yourself and not afraid to speak out. You were a forceful, visible, vocal leader in the community at a time when that was somewhat exceptional for women.*

Before Eleanor was ordained she helped with Sunday school teachers and the college group at Truman's church. Having people early on not want a woman involved in the leadership of worship was difficult, she said, "but Truman was steadfast in saying, 'She is going to be involved. She has seminary training, as do I. She is perfectly well equipped.'"

It was then that they started a group called the New Liturgy. It included a wide range of worship styles. Eleanor taught a rhythmic choir, an interpretative dance group. One Sunday a month, she was in charge of worship.

She also started the Presence group for people ministering to other lay people. "I taught listening skills and brainstorming as ways to find new solutions and options. By then," she said, "I was also teaching at Michigan State University." She started another Presence training group on campus at the invitation of a colleague. "Those were satisfying years," she said.

## 7. The Intertwining of Teaching and Ministry

Eleanor became aware of needs in her own life and in the community. She was a self-taught person, seeking out training that would prepare her to meet those needs.

When her first child grew to adolescence, she became a Parent Effectiveness Training<sup>4</sup> teacher. She started a support group for parents of adolescents. Through years' long training at the National Training Lab Institute,<sup>5</sup> a human interaction laboratory in Alexandria, Virginia, she became skilled as a group process person.

---

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.gordontraining.com/family.html>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.ntl.org/>

She went to California to study with Rollo May. These opportunities are common for women now but were unusual then.

Eleanor had begun her ministry in churches that Truman served. In the 26 years at Edgewood, she started many new programs that became institutions -- a cooperative nursery school, a family camp, crisis intervention lines and other ventures in the wider community.

"She loved teaching at the university but had never ceased being involved in the church," her daughter said. "She woke up to her deepest calling one day when she realized she was sneaking out of faculty meetings to lead a women's Bible study at Edgewood."

That study continued for more than a decade under her leadership. With reading the Bible from a woman's perspective, it became an early feminist circle. Through such experiences, she realized where her heart and deepest passions lay.

She had earned a Master's of Religious Education from Garrett Theological Seminary in the 1940s when women were not encouraged to get a bachelor of divinity. Now at age 55, she began talking to church and ministry people. Honoring her years of experience in the church, the ecclesiastical council granted her ordination at Edgewood in 1976.

A church woman admiring this woman of wisdom from a distance was impressed by her calmness and centeredness, her powerful demeanor and presence. The women shared similar philosophies – women's rights, civil rights, anti-racism, equal rights for gays and lesbians.

"I first became acquainted with Eleanor's leadership in the late 1980's at her weekend retreat in the year long United Church of Christ Pilgrimage Movement," said Mary Chamberlain of Dexter, Michigan. "Her gifts of Bible study, music and dance, meditation, the Centering silence, so important to Eleanor, brought us closer to God in our Pilgrimage."

## 8. Early Sexuality Educator

Early sexuality educator, advocate for justice for the LGBT<sup>6</sup> community, author and retreat leader, Eleanor also served three congregations. Trained in the art of designing and facilitating group process, she led numerous workshops, retreats and seminars in the

---

<sup>6</sup> Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender

areas of racial justice, human sexuality, parent effectiveness, feminist theology and spiritual development. She served as consultant on the first United Church of Christ human sexuality study in the early 1970s.

She taught for sixteen years at Michigan State University, designing the first courses in human sexuality at that university, teaching initially in the College of Home Economics:

At the time I was teaching on the campus, I was committed to the family, not simply a professional member of that family but helping people understand the importance of the whole family as a living unit.

Her Presence training course met in a large kiva. To reach the students on the four graduated levels of the large circle required a microphone.

"As I had done some reading and study in group process," Eleanor said, "I did not want to lecture. I decided to train several junior and senior students in the dynamics of leading group participation. They met with me twice a week about the design for that day and led small groups of six students. The class was always overly subscribed and the kiva was full."

Then a church member on the faculty of the College of Osteopathic Medicine took her aside. "Come and teach in this college," he said. "These people also need to know a woman of intelligence who is also clergy and who respects the family."

Soon the dean of the College of Human Medicine phoned to request that she teach courses in human sexuality. His students do not get that kind of instruction.

Eleanor agreed. At first she met resistance from a few male students who doubted that she had anything to teach them. "I won them over eventually," she said, "by thinking about how I should put things and whom I could invite up front to talk with me."

She had instituted panels in her classes where gay and lesbian students spoke. They took her to restaurants and gay bars. She came to know a number of graduate students. When a gay man was elected student body president, his presidency was called in question. Eleanor spoke up and out in his defense. The statewide Michigan Organization for Human Rights later gave her the Ally

Award in honor of her work on behalf of justice for LGBT people in the state.

## **9. A Mother and a Daughter**

While her mother has been engaged publicly in movements for social change for more than fifty years, Melanie said her mother also was a powerful ally at home:

*I never felt very comfortable in a dress. I wanted to wear jeans or slacks. You and Dad did not fault me for that. Day after day, I was sent home in violation of the 1956 dress code at Marble Elementary.*

*"Mom, it's not fair. It's not fair," I howled. "I cannot in a dress fly into home base or play on the jungle bars without boys looking up my skirt."*

*"Why don't you make your case to the principal?" you suggested. "Would you like me to go with you?"*

*That is a powerful example of an ally, Mom. You came with me, but I was the one who presented the case. I converted Mrs. Schwartz to my argument and wore jeans to school from that day forth.*

Melanie said that while she showed "other gender non-conforming behavior, I had no clue then that I would grow up to be a lesbian." Her parents were supportive of other activities unconventional for a girl in the 1950s.

*When I came out to myself in 1977 at the age of 28, you were the first person I told, Mom. Many lesbian women would say that their mother would be the last person they would tell. I told you because I experienced you as one who would be open to that.*

*I did not know before telling you the extent to which you had been involved with gay and lesbian people. I had been away from home and busy with my own life.*

Eleanor said she had no problem with her daughter's sexual orientation "because I had studied the whole area of human sexuality and taught it. I knew that one's lesbian or gay orientation was not a choice. People are born lesbian or gay.



"They may not be in a place or a time where they can express it, where they can choose a partner and live with them – or they may think they cannot. I have great respect for gay and lesbian people as people, not just because they are gay or lesbian.

"Our society, not so much now, but for the last three or four decades, has not been accepting. There are still a lot of churches and organizations that will not accept gay and lesbian people."

It is important for people to understand their own sexuality and to utilize it appropriately, she said. It is important for people to know the research about orientation.

## 10. The Leaven Center

Part of Melanie's primary motivation in wanting to work with her mother was to be an apprentice.

*I wanted you to mentor me in the skills you had acquired in terms of designing and facilitating group process and experiential learning. In the early days of Leaven, the United Church of Christ invited us to write a human sexuality curriculum for adults called Created in God's Image. It was exciting to work together as a mother-daughter team on such a groundbreaking project.*

*You have had a profound impact on my own teaching methodology, Mom, and the work I do at the Leaven Center. We did incredible work together.*

In 1987, Eleanor S. Morrison and Melanie Morrison co-founded Leaven – a small, nonprofit organization committed to providing resources and education in the areas of feminism, spiritual development and sexual justice. In 1995, Leaven launched The Leaven Center, a retreat and study center near Lyons, Michigan, where people working for social change find nourishment and courage for the struggle. Eleanor served as co-director until April 2005.

The Leaven Center was born of Eleanor and Melanie's conviction that the spiritual life cannot be divorced from an active concern for the world, and that those who work for justice need resources for spiritual renewal and vitality.

Eleanor and Melanie envisioned The Leaven Center as “holy ground”; a sacred place where individuals may gather with others who share experiences of oppression and liberation.”<sup>7</sup>

It is for “those who resist oppression and engender hope” with programs guided by a “commitment to racial, sexual, and economic justice; feminism; the rights of people with disabilities; and respect for the wisdom of varying religious and spiritual traditions.”

In 1994, Eleanor and Melanie launched Leaven's "Doing Our Own Work" seminar for white women to confront racism. There, more than 175 women from the United States and Canada have developed the analysis and the skills necessary to work with people of color to dismantle institutional, cultural, personal and interpersonal forms of racism.

*One of the strongest influences on my own life is a gift, a legacy from you, Mom, to see a need in the world that is not being responded to, to gather a group of people and to educate yourself about how to better understand that need, analyze it and respond to it and to do it.*

*Your Daughter, Melanie*

For Eleanor, among her most important contributions to society were working with her daughter and her friends and coming herself to understanding the severe injustice in most churches toward gay and lesbian people. She has worked in a wide range of ways of including gay and lesbian people in the work of a congregation and making it known that they were gay or lesbian when they wanted that to be made known.

## 11. Church Family Project

Plan with your youth group leader or pastor to view and discuss an appropriate video, such as "Bi-Sex'u-al." See below.

## 12. So What about You?

- Throughout her life, Eleanor has responded to racial and other injustices that she has seen around her by doing something about them.

---

<sup>7</sup> [www.leaven.org](http://www.leaven.org)

***What around you is unfair that you might be able to do something about?***

***When you have trouble rousing your courage to take action when you see an injustice, what do you do?***

- Eleanor remembers the integrity of the boy in her Sunday school class who refused to do what he did not believe in.

***Write or tell about someone you have known like this. Is that someone you?***

***How would you want to respond to people who refuse to accept you for who you are?***

***Tell about a time you took a stand when you were alone in that choice. What was difficult about that? What was easy? How did you withstand peer pressure? How did you feel afterward?***

- Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image . . ."  
(Genesis 1:26)

***What does being created in God's image mean for you?***

***What do you think it means for a gay person or a lesbian person?***

- We are all God's children. Read John 1:3-4 and John 1:12. Eleanor had no problem with her daughter's sexual orientation. She "knew from study and research that one's lesbian or gay orientation was not a choice. People are born lesbian or gay."

***Whom can you trust with your innermost wonderings?***

***How would (or did) you respond to a friend who told you he or she thought he/she might be gay or lesbian? What might be your most helpful response?***

### 13. Still Curious?

Books by Eleanor S. Morrison:

Honoring the Gifts of Wisdom and Age (Leaven, 1993)

Growing Up in the Family (United Church Press)

Growing Up Sexual (D. Van Nostrand Co., 1980)

Morrison, Eleanor S. and Melanie Morrison. Created in God's Image (United Church Board for Homeland Ministries, 1993)

Morrison, Eleanor S. and Mila Underhill Price. Values in Sexuality: A New Approach to Sexuality (Hart Pub, 1974)

Morrison, Eleanor S., Editor, and Vera Borosage, Editor. Human Sexuality: Contemporary Perspectives (First Edition, National Press Books, 1973)

Resources by Other Writers:

"Bi-Sex'u-al" Video. An introduction to three individuals through their stories of faith and sexuality. Study guide. Order through UCC Resources at 800-537-3394

Borhek, Mary V. Coming Out to Parents: A Two-way Survival Guide for Lesbians and Gay Men and Their Parents. UCC Resources

\_\_\_\_\_. My Son Eric: A Mother struggles to Accept her Gay Son and Discovers Herself. UCC Resources

"Circle of Grace: Affirming the Ministries of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Christians." Nine Bible study lesson plans and devotional resources enable congregations to rediscover the biblical basis for inclusion. UCC Resources

Friedan, Betty and Anna Quindlen. The Feminine Mystique (W. W. Norton & Co. Inc., 1963)

Henrikson, Marcy Clements. Our Daughter Martha: A Family Struggles with Coming Out. One Christian family's story of "coming out" to their church, friends and community as the family of a lesbian daughter. UCC Resources

Morrison, Melanie. The Grace of Coming Home: Spirituality, Sexuality, and the Struggle for Justice (The Pilgrim Press, 1995)

Pepper, Michal Anne. Reconciling Journey: A Devotional Workbook for Lesbian and Gay Christians. UCC Resources

Smith, Lillian Eugenia. Killers of the Dream (W.W. Norton & Company, 1944; reissued in 1994)

\_\_\_\_\_. Now is the Time (University of Mississippi Press, May 2004)

\_\_\_\_\_. Strange Fruit (Reynal & Hitchcock, 1944; reissued by Harvest Books, 1992)

Tigert, Leanne McCall and Timothy Brown, Editors. Coming Out Young and Faithful. Questioning teens describe their experiences in church. UCC Resources

See <http://www.ucc.org/lgbt> and <http://www.ucc.org/justice/owl/> for additional resources.

\*\*\*

Dallas (Dee) A. Brauninger. *Antoinette Brown Women: Finding Voice*, <http://ucc.org/women/finding.htm>.

March 2007