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Elise Boulding, matriarch of peace studies movement, dies at 89

By Emma Brown
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Elise Boulding, 89, a sociologist who was instrumental in establishing peace studies and conflict resolution as an academic discipline, died June 24 of complications from Alzheimer's disease at a nursing home in Needham, Mass.

Dr. Boulding, a Norwegian-born Quaker, taught at the University of Colorado at Boulder before retiring from Dartmouth College in the mid-1980s. As a matriarch of the peace studies movement, she emphasized the role of women and families in creating a less violent world.

"Elise Boulding was to peace studies what Rachel Carson was to conservation and Margaret Mead to anthropology," Colman McCarthy, a peace activist and former Washington Post columnist, wrote in an e-mail. "She gave academic legitimacy to the study of pacifism as both a moral force and a practical alternative to violence -- all the way from military violence to domestic violence."

Dr. Boulding raised five children long before she entered academia, and her experience as a mother convinced her that people can be taught to wage peace just as they are taught to wage war.

Lessons learned around the dinner table and on school playgrounds inevitably mold a person's method of dealing with conflict, Dr. Boulding thought. She wrote about the importance of educating children to become diplomats instead of aggressors and also about finding ways to raise children "to be sufficiently alienated from society, so they won't accept things 'as they are.'"

"We still don't know much about producing children who will irrepressibly dream about a better society than the one we have, and obstinately work for its realization," she wrote in notes unearthed by her biographer, Mary Lee Morrison. "Most of our writing about educating children for peace is concerned with helping children to become peaceful, rather than how to spur them to the rugged, often lonely task of peacemaking."

History's underside

Much of Dr. Boulding's scholarly work was grounded in what she called the underside of history -- the people and ideas that have been largely overlooked in narratives of the past. She wrote about important, little-heralded contributions by women from the Paleolithic period through modern times. As a counterpoint to studies of past wars and conflicts, she examined peaceful eras and cultures.

In her book "Cultures of Peace: The Hidden Side of History" (2000), Dr. Boulding said that peace is a daily and dynamic activity rather than a dull, static state. "Pacifism, which literally refers to the making of peace," she wrote, "is often mistakenly understood as passivism."

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Elise Marie Biorn-Hansen was born July 6, 1920, in Oslo. She moved with her family to New Jersey when she was 3. Growing up, she came to know her native country through her mother's homesick tales, and she thought of it as a refuge untouched by the rest of the world's tragedies. Then Hitler's army invaded Norway in 1940.

"And that was when I realized that there was no safe place on earth," she said. "And I knew that I had found my life's mission."

She graduated from what is now Rutgers University and joined the pacifist Friends Church, where she met her future husband, Kenneth Boulding, a Quaker poet and internationally renowned economist.

As the couple moved frequently for his academic career, Dr. Boulding established an early reputation as a skilled networker. While living in Tennessee in the 1940s, she created a newsletter to connect Quakers living in the South; later, she created another newsletter to unite women against nuclear testing.

In 1949, she received a master's degree in sociology from what is now Iowa State University.

When the family settled in Ann Arbor, Mich., she worked toward a doctorate and volunteered at the University of Michigan's Center for Conflict Resolution. She recalled going through the garbage at the center to rescue letters sent by researchers detailing their work in the nascent field of peace studies.

In Dr. Boulding's hands, that correspondence became the foundation of the International Peace Research Newsletter. That publication led to the formation of the International Peace Research Association, and she served as its secretary-general.

In the late 1960s, the Boulding family moved to Boulder, where Dr. Boulding headed the Women's International League of Peace and Freedom. In 1969, when her youngest child was a teenager, she received a doctorate in sociology from the University of Michigan. She spent much of 1973 on sabbatical in an isolated mountain cabin, writing the foundation of her 1976 book "The Underside of History: A View of Women Through Time."

She taught at the University of Colorado until 1978, when she joined the faculty at Dartmouth. There, she headed the sociology department and helped establish a peace studies department. In the course of her career, she wrote numerous articles and more than 10 books.

Her husband died in 1993. Survivors include five children, Christine Boulding of Wayland, Mass., Russell Boulding of Bloomington, Ind., Mark Boulding of Englewood, Colo., Philip Boulding of Olalla, Wash., and William Boulding of Durham, N.C.; 16 grandchildren; and nine great-grandchildren.

Dr. Boulding said one of her most important tasks was challenging people in workshops held across the country to envision a world in which quarrels are settled without threats or weapons.

"We cannot achieve what we cannot imagine," she wrote.

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