

ACPE

Association for Clinical Pastoral Education, Inc.

The Biography of Anton Theophilus Boisen



1897 *Arbutus* Yearbook
Indiana University

Anton Boisen is the pioneer founder of the clinical pastoral education movement. He was the first clergy to supervise students in what we know today as Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE). He believed in the first hand study of human experience as a way to challenge seminarians to think theologically. What he called reading “the living human documents” was a necessary supplement to classroom training in the seminary experience.

In 1926, he wrote about his method, "Theological training for the future will be a continuous affair, with the parish as the laboratory and a person with need the main concern, and the seminary a 'clearing-house' of theological tradition and formation and the supervisor of methods. The attention will be shifted from the past to the present; from books to the raw material of life."

In a mimeographed paper entitled *The Task and Methods of Theology*, he defines theology in this way “Theology may best be regarded as the cooperative attempt to organize religious experience by scrutinizing religious beliefs and inquiring into the origin, meaning, and consequences of these beliefs. It is assumed in this definition that religious experience is the sensation of fellowship raised to its highest level, a bonding with God and a genuine compassion for the well-being of all humankind.”

Boisen worked practically his entire life in mental institutions and had five major events of schizophrenia and a couple of lesser episodes himself. Coming out of these episodes, he felt that he had a clearer perspective on the relation of science and religion. To enhance his theological perspective, he became well informed by the behavioral sciences. He firmly believed he had broken an opening in the wall that separated medicine (science) and religion. However, Boisen always thought his contribution was toward research for theological education.

As Boisen stated on a number of occasions, he was interested in an empirical inquiry into the “theology of sin and salvation.” In his ministry and in his own personal life, he faced human despair and isolation and sought the resolution of that human predicament through the Christian promise of forgiveness and salvation. As a minister, it was Jesus' befriending and compassionate presence, what he called his “Beloved Community” that provided a refuge and strength to his painful life. The *community* was the focal point of his theological thought, and the inspiration of his work. “Sin was alienation from community,” and salvation was being incorporated into the “Beloved Community.”

“We are not trying to introduce anything new into theological curriculum beyond a new approach to some ancient problems. We are trying rather to call attention to the central task of the Church, that of saving souls, and to the central problem of theology - that of sin and salvation. What is new is the attempt to begin with the study of *living human documents* rather than books, and to focus attention upon those who are grappling with the issues of spiritual life and death” he wrote in 1944. In his career, Boisen blended this religious conviction with his interest in research, and in particular psychology. His method was to employ empirical practicality in his approach to the nature of the human condition and its resolution - evil and good, guilt and forgiveness, sin and salvation.

The Story of Boisen's life

Anton Theophilus Boisen was born October 28, 1876, the first child of Hermann Boisen and Elizabeth Louisa Wylie Boisen. His father, Hermann Boisen, reared in Schleswig-Holstein (then a part of Denmark) and educated in Germany, arrived in the USA in 1869. He came to these shores because his family did not have the means to help him complete a doctoral degree in Germany. However, it was soon discovered that he was a genius as a teacher; and in 1870, he was recommended to teach at DePauw University. Then two years later, he came to Indiana University to fill a vacancy in the Chair of Modern Languages. He spent ten years teaching German at Indiana University before going east to teach first at Williams College in the Berkshires, then in the Boston area, and finally at Lawrenceville Academy near Princeton, New Jersey. While teaching at Lawrenceville he suddenly had a heart attack and died at 38 years of age.



Hermann Boisen

Elizabeth Louisa Wylie Boisen, and her two small children, Anton and Marie, moved into the household of her father and mother Wylie back in Bloomington, Indiana.

The idolized memory of his father was a part of Boisen's entire life. It was a blessing and at times a curse. His was a blend of the old and the new, the unyielding Covenant Reformed Presbyterianism of his grandfather Wylie and the more moderate theological formation and foundation of his mother's Presbyterian Church USA in Bloomington. Later he developed his own "brand" of Liberal Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York City.

Boisen's maternal family was among the founders of Indiana University. The Rev. Dr. Andrew Wylie, a Presbyterian clergy and first President of the then Indiana Academy/College, was a cousin of Theophilus Wylie. Theophilus and his family from Philadelphia came to the "wilderness" of Indiana in 1837; and for 46 years, he was a Professor of Mathematics and Natural History at IU. When Hermann Boisen died, his wife, and two children moved into the Wylie home in Bloomington, Indiana.



Theophilus Adam Wylie

Grandfather Theophilus Wylie was by nature of the strictest kind. He was a Covenant Reformed Presbyterian clergy, who ruled the household as a faithful Scotch-Irish Presbyterian. He held that only the Psalms should be used as church music, and that musical instruments should be forbidden at worship. Sabbath-keeping was regarded as imperative. There was a tyranny of oughts and shoulds in the Wylie household that remained with Anton Boisen his entire life.

Anton's mother, Elizabeth Louisa Wylie Boisen, was one of the first women to enroll at Indiana University. After her graduation in 1871, she taught at the University of Missouri. She left Missouri at the end of her first year to marry her teacher of modern language at Indiana University, Professor Hermann Boisen. Anton Theophilus was their first child. He had a younger sister, Marie Louise, born when Anton was three. She graduated in psychology at Indiana University in 1900.

Anton's sister, Marie Louise, was a brilliant, spirited, and creative person. Anton held a life-long jealousy toward his energetic sister, and her excellence in the world of academia, in particular scientific studies. She married Morton Clark Bradley, Assistant Controller of the Boston and Maine Railroad. The couple had two children. She lived her adult life in Arlington, Massachusetts.

In his childhood and adolescence, Boisen was thoroughly exposed to the Reformed Presbyterianism of his grandfather. In reflection, later in life, he said he did not derive much meaning from the long Sunday morning services and the daily Bible readings and prayers in the household. However, he admits that this period of his life did have a significant effect upon his basic view of religion.



Elizabeth Louisa Wylie Boisen

During this period, the influence of his mother was also very significant. His mother was a progressive woman for that time. He came to respect her perspective on life. In his junior year of high school he joined the moderate Presbyterian Church, the First Presbyterian Church. Later in life, having had this foundation in his relationship to his mother, he showed an interest in Liberal Theology as it was taught at Union Seminary in New York.

Anton attended grade school, junior high, and graduated from Bloomington High School in 1893. He enrolled at Indiana University and received a BA in Modern Languages on June 9, 1897. He taught French in a high school in Bloomington for a couple of years. At this time, he became deeply interested in the writings of William James. His favorite teacher at IU, Dr. William Lowe Bryan, had introduced him to William James' *Principles of Psychology and Varieties of Religious Experience*. During this period, he continued to study psychology and French on the IU campus.



Alice Batchelder

One day in 1902, he met a young woman who was a YWCA worker on the IU campus, Alice Batchelder. She was a recent graduate of Smith College. He and Alice had an on-and-off relationship until her death in 1935. Actually for Boisen it was primarily off. He wanted to marry her, but she refused his proposals. For him, as he wrote in his 80s, "She was a gifted woman. Her compassion for me, her wisdom, her courage, and her unswerving fidelity have made possible the measure of success I have experienced, exploring the inner world of mental disorder and religious experience." She represented a mysterious, mediumistic, figure who never became a real person. Imagine, Boisen, the rigid, preoccupied, and distant personality on the one hand, and Alice, the "guardian angel," the "unreachable star," the "guiding hand of God" on the other - not a match made in heaven. The failure of this relationship was Anton's deepest sadness and grief for most of his adult life.

Boisen gave up teaching high school French and enrolled at Yale University to study forestry. He received a Master's degree in Forestry in 1905. He was a Forest Assistant in the United States Government, Department of Agriculture's Forest Service from 1905 to 1908. During this time, he learned basic research from his lifelong friend, Dr. Raphael Zon who was Chief Forester.

During his years at Yale, he got in touch with a renewed longing of his spirituality. As he was walking down the streets of New Haven, he felt a call to ministry. The next day, on April 2, 1905 the President of Union Theological Seminary in New York, Rev. Henry Sloan Coffin, was preaching at the chapel service. His subject was the "Call to Ministry." This was a synchronistic moment for Boisen, and he felt his own call to ministry being confirmed. So, in 1908 he left his job as a forester, and he enrolled at Union Seminary in New York City. There he studied with Dr. George Albert Coe, an eminent liberal theologian and teacher of psychological studies and the ministry. Coe was particularly interested in the study of religious experience. The individualistic approach of Coe stayed with Boisen, and he developed a dynamic view of the psychology of religion grounded in human behavior and religion. Like Coe, he despaired that theologians tended to rely on texts rather than human nature. He received a Bachelor of Divinity from Union Seminary in 1911.

Boisen was ordained a Presbyterian minister in 1912. He was later a minister within the Congregational church because that is where ministry opened for him. He referred to himself as Presbygationalist. He did survey work for the Presbyterian Board of Home Missions, served two very short-term pastorates, and short of a year as Congregational chaplain on the campus of Iowa State University. During WWI, he worked two years for the YMCA in France.

After teaching French, entering forestry, training to become a parish minister, working in church survey, serving two congregations, part of a year as a college chaplain, two years in France during WWI, he had yet to find his true calling. He was now 44 years old, so in 1920, he decided he wanted to settle down and have a pastorate in a church. His overriding "ulterior" motive was to persuade Alice to marry him.

In the process of writing his *Statement of Faith* in preparation for a call through the Brooklyn New York Presbytery, he became obsessed with delusional fantasies. He had a mental breakdown. And he was committed to Boston Psychiatric Hospital and later he was at Westboro State Hospital. He was treated for catatonic schizophrenia. He described his experience as "a most profound and unmistakable madness." In his *Statement of Belief* he wrote, "I believe that God was perfectly revealed in the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. His patience with our shortcomings, his

compassion upon our infirmities, his unfaltering faith in men, even his enemies, and his method of dealing with them, not through force, but through the power of love, culminating in his death upon the cross, where he died, the just for the unjust, the perfect for the imperfect, the strong for the weak." He felt that the weak and imperfect should no longer accept this sacrifice and that "they should be willing to give their lives, the imperfect for the perfect and the weak for the strong, that the divine may be freed from its prison house of infirmity and be able to come into the world in beauty and power." Boisen continued, "I believe that the family should consist of four and not of two, of the strong and perfect and of the guardian angels who in the joy of serving and sharing in the happiness of those they love will find compensation for the sacrifices that some will always have to make."

Later, in recovery, he reflected on this experience, and he began to understand his illness as related to the diversity of religious experiences. He wrote: "Certain types of mental disorder and certain types of religious experience are, alike, attempts at reorganization." He'd learned during Dr. William Lowe Bryan's classes at IU that "at the peak of a human crisis there is a turning toward healing, toward reorganization, toward reconnection." From the arrhythmia of despair and madness, there emerged a transformation, a new rhythm, the vital primal rhythm of life that Dr. Bryan called a religious experience of the Holy. Upon reflection, Boisen said he had "broken an opening in the wall that separated religion and medicine." It was after studied reflection on this initial episode of mental illness that he discovered his true call to ministry.

Throughout this period, his friend Fred Eastman was a close comrade and associate. He met Eastman at Union Seminary, and they hit it off immediately. Eastman went with Boisen in 1911 to undertake a joint study of rural churches in north-eastern Missouri. In the dark days of his first mental breakdown, 1920, Fred Eastman was with him giving support personally or writing letters which were encouraging to Boisen when he was in "the depths." In his autobiography, *Out of the Depths*, Anton cites twelve extensive letters to Fred Eastman between 1920 and 1923. These letters represent Anton's trust in Fred Eastman as they contain the profound depths of his struggle with mental illness. This was during the period of his first psychotic episode - the "Little Known Country." He said that Fred was, for him, a representative of psychotherapy at its best. Eastman was not a trained counselor, but he was skilled in interpersonal relationships of understanding and friendship on one side and trust on the other.

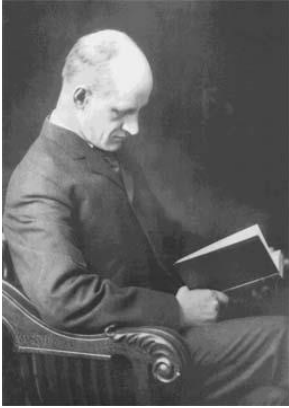
Anton was also greatly influenced by Dr. William Lowe Bryan, by now President of Indiana University. An example of the relationship is found in a pastoral letter from William Lowe Bryan, now President Emeritus of Indiana University. He is writing to Boisen in 1941. It seems that it was prompted after Anton had difficulty with a Bible class in Olney, Illinois. Bryan writes, "Dear Anton, Your experience at the Bible class in Olney brings to my mind the practice of the Apostle Paul in adjusting his message to his audiences. This, as you know, is well illustrated in the Acts and is stated by him plainly, even bluntly, to the Corinthians. He had a profound metaphysic and theology, but he said to the Corinthians you cannot understand the hidden wisdom...I therefore preach to you nothing but Christ and Christ crucified." He goes on in the letter to state the order of salvation, from his point of view, citing Albert Schweitzer who said that Paul had three conceptions of salvation which did not quarrel with one another." He goes on in the letter to cite Paul's metaphysic as coming from the Hebrew philosophers and from the Greeks: Plato, Philo, Aristotle, and Plotinus. Paul's way to salvation is not mechanical, not legal, but is based on the belief that we are bound together in one bundle of life with each other and with the Christ." He ends the pastoral letter to Boisen saying: "This is a long letter. What I have in mind is that a minister does well indeed if he can follow Paul's example - talking to children that they can understand him, talking to businessmen in a giant Bible class so that they can understand him, but always with the underlying spirit of the Christ that radiates through whatever he says." He ends the letter "Affectionately, William Lowe Bryan."



Dr. William Lowe Bryan

This letter from Bryan is an example of their relationship, and the respect they had one for the other. Bryan's admonition in general and specific terms, regarding what a minister needs to be attentive to was wisdom for the ministers and for Anton himself. It is a letter representing William Lowe Bryan's faith in the Bible and in particular the Apostle Paul's message. Also, theologically, Bryan's statement: "we are bound together in one bundle of life with each other and with the Christ" has a like point in Anton's theology of Redemption being the "communion of best" and the "Beloved Community." Boisen says that all true life is social life, is life-together. It is "being-with" and "being-for" the

other. He goes into greater depth, in particular the social dynamic of religious life, in *Religion in Crisis and Custom: A Sociological and Psychological Study of Religion* with special reference to American Protestantism.



Dr. Richard Cabot

Dr. Richard Cabot, MD, was a well-known medical reformer during this era. He was on the faculty of Harvard Medical School and was one of America's best known physicians. He created the Clinical-Pathologic Conference for medical students at Harvard. He wrote and spoke extensively on medical ethics. His primary concerns were clinical and humanistic. In 1920, he left full-time medical work to teach social ethics at Andover Theological Seminary and the Episcopal Theological Seminary in Boston. He founded hospital social work and worked with Anton Boisen to start the CPE program at Worcester State Hospital in 1925.

He proposed the clinical case method of learning for graduate theological students from his experience with medical students at Harvard. In 1922, he had advocated that seminary students have a year's supervised experience with people suffering from the infirmities of

humankind just as medical students do before going to their work as licensed physicians.

Cabot was a recognized pioneer in efforts to define the physician's role in human well-being; and, in his work at seminaries, he promoted that for theological students. His "Plea for a Clinical Year in the Course of Theological Study" that came out in the fall of 1925 was a major factor toward founding the clinical pastoral education movement.

After a short period in the Social Service Department at Boston Psychiatric Hospital, Boisen was helped by Dr. Cabot to become chaplain at Worcester State Hospital. In the contract with Worcester State Hospital, it was agreed that he would teach one term at Chicago Theological Seminary each year. In this way, Boisen entered specialized ministry as a chaplain and an educator to become one of the founders of the pastoral care and education movement in the USA.

On Christmas Eve, 1924, two graduate student's in one of Cabot's classes at the Episcopal Seminary in Boston came to Worcester State Hospital to talk about doing training with Boisen. Although neither one came to Worcester, they gave Boisen an idea. He designed a program and offered the very first unit of clinical pastoral training in the summer of 1925. He had four students including Helen Flanders Dunbar, who later became an important leader in the pastoral care and education movement.

By 1930, Dr. Flanders Dunbar and Boisen were in New York with the formation of the corporation of the Council for Clinical Training of Theological Students. Later, Rev. Phillip Guiles, Rev. Russell Dicks, and Dr. Cabot began programs at Andover Theological Seminary and at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. This was the nucleus for the Institute



CPE Supervisors in Council for Clinical Training – 1932
FR: Hildreth (Syracuse), Beatty (Mayview), Dunbar (Director),
Boisen (Elgin), Dodd (Rhode Island)
BR: Guiles (Field Secretary), Wise (Worcester State),
Bryan (Superintendent)

for Pastoral Care, incorporated in 1944. Subsequent years showed a steady increase of interest in clinical training for clergy. By 1940, training existed not only in mental hospitals but also in general medical settings. Dr. Richard Cabot may have been an initial spark that started the clinical pastoral education movement, but it was the steady work of Rev. Anton T. Boisen at Worcester State Hospital that actually carried out training and established the model for those who followed.

Boisen developed the case study method as the written human document for theological reflection. Boisen developed a detailed guide that needed to be used in the process of gathering information about a person. The strength of this tool was its ability to help students learn how to reflect systematically about the human condition, both psychological and theological.

He stayed at Worcester State Hospital from 1924 to 1932 when he left to take a position in the Chicago area at Elgin State Hospital. He was both closer to Chicago Theological Seminary where he continued to be Lecturer and Research Associate, and also Alice who worked in Chicago. His move to Elgin came after a significant episode of mental illness at the time of his mother's death, 1930. This lasted for three weeks, and he left the hospital fully recovered.

Simultaneous to Anton's hospitalization in 1930 was a "falling out" with the leaders of what became the Institute for Pastoral Care. Dr. Cabot no longer trusted Anton's judgment and his leadership; and a break occurred between the two. Cabot would have nothing to do with those who purported that mental illness was due to inner psychiatric problems in living. He rejected the claim of Boisen that a breakthrough had occurred between the science of medicine and humanity of the religious.

Soon after Boisen's arrival at Elgin in 1932, he established the Chicago Council for Clinical Training. He functioned well after the major episode in 1930. However, he had another mental breakdown in 1935. The precipitating factor in this episode was twofold: Alice had told him she had cancer and that death was imminent and his manuscript for *The Exploration of the Inner World* had not been accepted for publication. Alice died on December 2, 1935. He was unable to attend her funeral because of hospitalization. His book was published by Willett, Clark, and Company in 1936. After he left the mental hospital in late December of 1935, he did not have another major episode of mental illness and was symptom free.

At this time, Boisen became close friends with Dr. Flanders Dunbar who was interested in integrating religion and science and, eventually, medicine and psychiatry through psychosomatic medicine. The Council for Clinical Training under Dr. Flanders Dunbar's leadership moved to New York City; and the New England group, under the aegis of Phillip Guiles, centered around Andover Newton Theological School and the Boston area. It was avowed by Charles Hall in *Head and Heart* that Phillip Guiles remained loyal to Cabot and retained the programs in New England separate from the Council in New York. In 1944, the New England CPE programs came under the Institute of Pastoral Care. This schism was precipitated out of the encounters, feelings, pride, and audacity of Dr. Flanders Dunbar, Dr. Richard Cabot, Anton Boisen, and Phillip Guiles. Anton joined the Council with the support of his good friend and colleague Dr. Dunbar. Through the following years, Anton was both a supporter and critic of both groups.



Helen Flanders Dunbar

Despite his break from Dr. Richard Cabot, he gave tribute to Dr. Cabot as a partner in the new venture in theological education. "No consideration of the beginnings of this movement can leave Dr. Richard Cabot out of the account. Without his powerful support the movement could hardly have got under way. He stood behind the early proposal, which of a research project at the Boston Psychopathic Hospital in 1923, ready, if need be, to provide financial support. It was he who found the opening at the Worcester State Hospital and it was he who in 1925 gave nation-wide publicity to the idea of a clinical year for theological students. Also, Dr. William A. Bryan's part as superintendent of the Worcester State Hospital, and that of Dr. Charles E. Reed at the Elgin State Hospital, has been for me of crucial importance."

In the formation of what became the pastoral care movement, Anton Boisen joined the Calvinist religious foundation of his youth and early years with the liberal theology of turn of the century America in forming a new method of doing theology. He combined the two religious traditions with the radical pragmatism of William James to emerge with an empirical inquiry into theology derived from listening to the variety of religious experiences of individuals and eventually groups. He urged his students to inquire into the lived moments in the lives of ordinary people and there you will discover the elemental questions humankind faces as people trying to "be human." His quest was for the "inner genius," that is the attendant religious presence that drives an individual with the gift of grace, wisdom, love and energy in the face of the ups and downs of daily living. More important Boisen wanted his students to discover the religious experience that brings people successfully through such struggles. His interest was the revelation and transformation that emerged out of his many recurring episodes of serious mental illness. Boisen was convinced that the religious was the integrating spine, the originating genes of human life.

Boisen's Theology: Theology as a Creative Interplay of the Traditional and the Liberal

Anton Boisen wrote a practical and challenging book *Religion in Crisis and Custom* in which he said: "as individuals come face to face with the ultimate realities of life and death, religion and theology tend to come alive." This became a shaping vision. He believed that "Theology has always been concerned with the motivating beliefs of people regarding their origin and destiny and their relationship to the universe. It has dealt with that which is supreme in the hierarchy of desires and values and with the choices that favor or impede maximum self-realization."

He said in a speech before the Council in 1950, the 25th anniversary, "We are not seeking to introduce anything new into the theological curriculum beyond a new approach to some ancient problems. We are trying, rather, to call attention back to the central task of the Church, that of 'saving souls,' and to the central problem of theology, that of 'sin and salvation.' What is new is the attempt to begin with the study of "living human documents" rather than books, and to focus attention upon those who are grappling with the issues of spiritual life and death. I believe that love is the paramount human need and that there is a law within which forbids us to be satisfied with any fellowship save that of the best religious experience that is fellowship raised to its highest level, and religion is thus a necessary consequence of the social nature of humankind. From the religious standpoint, the aim of education is to lead the growing individual to transfer her loyalty from the finite to the infinite. For the religious person this higher loyalty is represented by the 'idea of God' and that idea stands for something that is operative in the lives of all humankind, whether they recognize it or not."

Hiltner said: "He and his students, he argued, were not studying psychiatry and psychology as such, although he always acknowledged the help he had received from psychiatrists and psychologists. The students were studying theology, because they brought theological questions to the deep crisis experiences of life, and should return with deeper understanding of theological answers."

Boisen's theological views were an amalgamation of four major influences. **First**, there was his early religious heritage in the late nineteenth century, critically-oriented and intellectually alert view of the Christian faith. The Calvinism of his grandfather's household ran as a long red string throughout his life. **Second**, there was the influence of the theological liberalism of the progressive era, the early twentieth century. **Third**, there was Boisen's own serious mental illness, erupting in his mid-forties which he interpreted not only psychologically but theologically. **Fourth**, there was the conviction that theology was method as well as content, and that the study of 'living human documents' was an indispensable aspect of that method." Boisen linked traditional Christianity with early 20th century liberal, empirical theology.

Scotch-Irish Covenanter Presbyterianism

First. The strict Scotch Irish Reformed Calvinist theology of his grandfather defined Boisen even as he sought his way out of it. He bore the marks of a shame-based life regarding principally his own sexuality. The foundation of this shame certainly came from this early childhood experience in the Wylie household. Nevertheless, the sense of self developed in those early years was internalized and it became the lens through which other relationships were viewed later in life.

Theological Liberalism

Second. Both his mother and his father were liberal in their religious life. As he matured, Boisen cast a critical eye on what he considered his strict Calvinist rearing. He joined the "more moderate" First Presbyterian Church as a teen in Bloomington.

At Union Seminary, George Coe taught him that liberal theology was a religion of social immediacy; a spontaneous experience shared with another, a social experience. Boisen wrote in *Religion in Crisis and Custom* (1945): "Religious experience is rooted in the social nature of man and arises spontaneously under the pressure of crisis situations. We frequently find the sense of contact with the ultimate reality to which we give the name of 'God.' This means a new awareness of the individual's continuity with society at its best."

Paramount Human Need for Love

Boisen said: "The paramount human need is for love and that there is a law within which forbids us to be satisfied with any fellowship save that of the best." To be saved meant to be (1.) "One with the best in the social experience, and (2.) Be a useful participant in the struggle for the attainment of the determined objectives." There was always a social communitarianism in his theology placing humankind in the **Community of the Beloved**. In this sense, his theology was contextual.

Boisen was not always comfortable with the social community aspect of liberal theology. He had personal difficulty being dynamically connected to a community even though he wrote a lot about community, the "Beloved Community." He was often too invested in the forest of research, and his own personal struggles, to be able to see the trees of human relationships.

He was unabashedly Christian in his outlook, upholding the belief that what God intends to accomplish through the life and ministry of Jesus is a lasting demonstration of the depth of Divine Love.

Boisen was at once defined by traditional and liberal theological perspectives, and also simultaneously, he did not find comfort either in the Covenanter Presbyterianism of his youth nor in the liberal theology of his more mature years. He was critical of both. Liberal theology became a dominant theme in his life but I believe he had a hard time finding spiritual comfort in his liberal theology.

What Title as a Theologian?

What title can we give to Boisen as a theologian? I have settled on the term: *progressive empiricist*.

Progressive: Boisen was a product of the progressive era. He emphasized individual needs and the capacities, strengths and weakness, of each student and patient. Developing a theology of uses, in an attitude toward one another, in how we treat one another, in what use we make of ourselves, this was primary in human relationships. He was constantly in discourse with the common human experiences of life. Indeed, one of his progressive empirical methods was to create models, metaphors, symbols, and signs that reflected humankind's best understanding of God and Christ as the door to the dominion of God.

Empiricist for he believed clergy should include in their preparation the "study of living human documents." His basic concern was that the use of theological language be in touch with concrete data of human experience. In theological education he advocated for the study of concrete religious experience accompanied by a deep concern for the welfare of troubled individuals. What he wanted to return to is something like Freiderich Schliermacher's theology of religion as experience, "clearing up the channels of understanding within individuals and between individuals." Schliermacher was the father of empirical theology. His appeal was to religious experience. He said, "Religion's essence is neither thinking nor acting, but intuition and feeling."

Charles Gerkin reminds us that "Central to Boisen's intention was that the depth experience of individuals, in the struggles of their mental and spiritual life, demanded the same respect as do the historic texts from which the foundation of the Judeo-Christian faith are drawn."

The genius of Boisen's progressive empirical theology was that the care of the soul began in a particular, often (although not necessarily) problematic situation. It was that situation and its particular resolution that was the foundation for theological reflection. It was not the rational theologian's concern with generalization that was at issue. Progressive empirical theology was focused on the particular, and it was this that related it to liberal theology while retaining a grounding in the language and meaning of traditional Christianity. What Boisen most clearly contributed to pastoral care and counseling was the importance of theological context.

Boisen put students into situations in the mental health facility asking them to "join with another person's curiosity about their beliefs and the complex entanglements of actual life." His was a cooperative inquiry. Out of this context, is raised the question: "How is it going with you and God?" The relationship begins to build, and thinking theologically begins to occur.

Narrative Theology

Boisen pioneered for us what we call today narrative theology. He was a "Superauditor." Narrative theology first emerged in the early part of the twentieth century. In theological circles today there is heightened interest in human life structured by narrative. We make sense of life through the stories we tell.

Stanley Hauerwas, a strong proponent of narrative, said, "Christian convictions take the form of a story, or perhaps better a set of stories that constitute a tradition, which in turn creates and forms a community. My contention is that the narrative mode is neither incidental nor accidental to Christian belief. There is no more fundamental way to talk of God than in story."

For Boisen, the insight into the living human document, the depth experiences in the struggles of their mental and spiritual life, came from listening and telling story, by listening to the story of the living human documents theology develops ideas with confidence. In the light of the focus on narrative theology; and his new and crisp theological methodology, Boisen's contribution has important theological significance for our time.

Henri Nouwen said: "Although he did not come up with new theological insights, his new clinical approach to these age-old questions gave it a new and fresh articulation, placing it in a relevant context and brought theology back from the 'brains-level' to the 'guts-level.'"

Legacy: The "Johnny Appleseed of the Clinical Pastoral Education Movement"



Anton Boisen (80-years old)

Wayne Oates called Anton T. Boisen the "Johnny Appleseed" of the clinical pastoral education movement. In the oral history video Wayne Oates says: "He was a Johnny Appleseed kind of planter of the clinical approach to the empirical study of theology." He planted and he nurtured the movement throughout his long life. This was his passion.

Anton Boisen died at Elgin on October 2, 1965. He was eighty-eight years old. A brief committal service was held at the Hilltop Cemetery at the Elgin State Hospital at which time his ashes were strewn over the grounds of the cemetery. Rev. Donald Beatty, a longtime colleague at Elgin State Hospital paid tribute to the life of Anton Boisen. Beatty said: "It should be remembered, in assessing the value of Boisen's pioneer work, that in 1925 there were very few full-time chaplains in general and mental hospital; and there were almost none where the incumbent had specific training for this specialized ministry. How different is the situation now only a scant forty years later. Our Association (ACPE) was in very large measure influenced by Boisen and those who had come into this field of ministry either directly or indirectly by virtue of his influence."

Describing Rev. Anton Boisen's funeral, Thomas Klink says, "The scene was not spectacular, today. The weather was modestly autumnal and the sky just ordinarily overcast. Except for the cluster of awkward mourners - forty or fifty people including Chaplain Charles Sullivan, Professor Victor Obenhaus (who, respectively, read the requested service and the obituary), a few patients, a handful of friends, a few hospital staff, and a little group of ex-students - it was an unremarkable state hospital burial. There were no tears. There was little conversation, little drama. But, because he lived and suffered and imposed his always-distant urgency on others, some of the living seem less likely to be scattered as burned-out ashes 'back of the hospital,' over the fallow waste ground."

Boisen is important today for he was primarily concerned with helping graduate seminary students learn theology by deepening their insights into the nature of the human predicament and the religious response through the study of 'living human documents,' as well as through books and journals and sermons and human reason. As we get to know him personally through his life struggles and accomplishments, through his writings, his essays, and the oral history and comments of his students and professional colleagues, a deeper respect, understanding and practical usefulness of his method will enhance theological education in the twenty first century.

The Rev. Robert Leas
Past ACPE History Manager