# A Spectacular Inheritance:

**What I Kept and What I Left Behind**

*Margaret Eastman Smith*

## Foreword

I was delighted when Margaret Smith asked me to write a forward for her brilliant memoir When are We Going Home? This book chronicles Margaret's journey from a childhood embedded in the embrace of her parents and grandparents' world of Moral Re-Armament, toward a self-definition that holds the tension between her loyalty to that world and her desire to find her own way. This tension – between visions of community, between community and individual self, and ultimately between different notions of self – is her constant companion and ironically may be the core of the very self for which she has been searching.

The world from which she came was politically oriented, very idealistic, and grounded in a religious outlook much akin to fundamentalism. Indeed, the story provides a window into a sincerely-held traditional Christian mindset as much as calling out some of its perils. For Margaret rarely judges – neither where she comes from, the people whom she idealizes and then de-idealizes, nor herself. Her confusion is held with dignity and ultimately becomes part of the very identity she seeks. Those looking for a rant against "fundamentalist cults" will not find what they are looking for here. Those looking for an example of how a sense of truth is developed, clumsily but relentlessly over time, may indeed find what they are looking for.

Margaret starts with community, politics and religion – that is what the Oxford Group, later Moral Re-Armament, stands for. It is significant that Alcoholics Anonymous started out as a branch of the Oxford Group – AA stands for community and religion. Its community and religion are based on an awareness that we are all lost and must

constantly – day by day – regain our footing and find our way, only to perhaps lose it again at any time. AA also recognizes that we cannot do this alone, yet somehow the responsibility for doing this is indeed "mine" alone. AA works with that paradox.

Margaret's journey could be seen partly as a movement from a political-religious position to a more psychological – and perhaps even ontological – approach to understanding life. It can also be seen as a movement from righteousness to empathic openness as a fundamental stance toward living. And it can be seen as reconceiving the poignancy of intimacy in terms of finite, partial, and halting discovery rather than passionate celebration and exhortation. It is not surprising that Margaret used the old forms of her thinking and feeling in the pursuit of new ones. It is not surprising that it has taken so long for Margaret to begin to live in these new forms of thinking.

I have known Margaret for over four years now, as a class member at my Institute for Existential-Psychoanalytic Therapy, where she recognized with excitement that Martin Heidegger's philosophy put into words things she had already discovered on her journey. Heidegger highlights that human beings are basically lost – not as a bad thing, but just the way it is. We do get found from time to time – religion, philosophy, art, and especially human connection can find us – but then we always get lost again. Learning to be lost in the right way is essential in Heidegger's existential view. While we are all essentially innocent (we have been thrown into our world and we can only use the cards we have been dealt), Heidegger argues that we are also responsible for the situation into which we have been thrown. Margaret has taken that responsibility very seriously for most of her life.

The class also gave us the chance to delve into psychoanalytic developmental theory and attachment theory, both of which emphasize that the necessary basis of a good life is to be securely attached to another. Only then can we genuinely individuate toward becoming our self. Self is an achievement, not a given. It requires nurturance, acceptance, and empathy as well as active ideals and goals. Margaret's family provided her with profoundly significant ideals and goals but did not appreciate the importance of attachment

for its own sake, celebrating a child for just being who she is (as opposed to doing what she is supposed to do), and the importance of sadness and grieving about the state of the world. Her community preached positive psychology as well as progress and enlightenment, and she has taken all that in beautifully. But it did not teach her how to deal with loss and the profound emptiness that is part of existence. Her story demonstrates how she came to terms with this truth.

Margaret describes in the book how she began to embrace a life of "lost and found and then lost and found again," using Heidegger's remarkable concept of *unheimlichkeit* – the "not-at-homeness" of being human. She shows in the story she has begun to see that home is our longing for it, rather than a place to which we return or arrive. She captures in her own story Freud's important concept of the repetition compulsion, showing how human beings are continually beginning again and again to find their way home. Good therapy is a place where we are helped to grieve the illusion of this arrival rather than continue banging our heads against it.

Margaret has not given up community and social policy for philosophy and psychology. However, her exploration of existential and psychoanalytic ways of thinking allows her to approach her political and community commitments with more breadth and depth.

Margaret the writer and counselor alludes only in the Epilogue to her late life marriage, though I believe Philip is part of the story. Philip is her own choice – not part of a program, not based on desperation, not based on a drama which has been written by someone else. When I talk to Margaret on Zoom, Philip comes in with a cup of tea for her and smiles at me. Life is simpler, less frantic now. Hard work still needs to be done to help people – individuals, families, communities – survive and thrive in this world. Margaret will never stop making that her concern. But she is more at home in the tension of homelessness than she ever has been – and the joy that brings her, and those who love her, is wonderful to see.

Robert Fox, MSW, LICSW
The Institute for Existential-Psychoanalytic Therapy
The New England Institute for Existential Therapy