Anton Boisen's own life illustrates his thesis that wholeness comes out of inner conflict, not in spite of it.

Some Contributions of Anton T. Boisen (1876-1965) to Understanding Psychiatry and Religion*

ANTON T. BOISEN, whose singular contribution to understanding psychiatry and religion and whose pioneering in the development of clinical pastoral training are widely recognized, was a dramatically complex person. He suffered an acute, psychotic reaction necessitating hospitalization where he recorded the process of the illness and recovery through letters to friends. Despite the serious doubts of his doctors he went on to graduate work in psychology and religion to become an eminent teacher, author, and originator of clinical pastoral training. He also had the audacity to claim that his achievements were precisely because of the illness, not in spite of it. In fact, much of his original thinking comes from his tireless empirical study to test the insights formed during the periods of acute conflict.

His three principal books are: Out of the Depths,¹ an autobiography, Exploration of the inner World,² which offers his basic hypothesis, and Religion in Crisis and Custom,³ which studies religious group life in the perspective of his hypothesis.

Anton T. Boisen's background was rich in the atmosphere of the university at a time when classical learning and devotion to age-old religion and morality were stressed. His father, Hermann B. Boisen, came from a German-speaking family of some political and religious influence in the province of Schleswig. Coming to the United States in 1869 just prior to the completion of his doctorate, the father became professor of modern languages at Indiana University. A strong, brilliant and creative man who sought to live an orderly life guided by religion and morality, Hermann B. Boisen was nevertheless somewhat impulsive, eventually resigning his position at Indiana University in protest over the dismissal of a colleague. He then served as a teacher in a brief succession of jobs in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Boston, Massachusetts, and Princeton, New Jersey, coming to his


² Executive Director
³ Association for
⁴ Clinical Pastoral Education
⁵ New York, New York
⁶ PASTORAL PSYCHOLOGY/SEPTEMBER 1968
⁷ 40
⁸ CHARLES E. HALL, JR.
untimely death of a heart attack in 1884 when Anton was but seven years old. Anton T. Boisen later writes:

"My father thus died when I was only three months past my seventh birthday, but his memory, reinforced by my mother's picture of him and that of others who knew him, has remained a potent force in my life, one which for me has been associated with my idea of God."

His mother, Louise Wylie Boisen, had ancestors who came from England in the 17th century. In her family were wealthy merchants, clergymen, and professors. Her father was a professor at Indiana University at the same time that he served as pastor of a Presbyterian church. Boisen wrote of his mother:

"My earliest memories of my mother are of her singing. She had had excellent training in music . . . and had a sweet contralto voice. . . . Mother was gentle and retiring. Throughout her dealings with me she relied on persuasion rather than compulsion. She made me feel bad when I did not do as I ought."

The first child of his parents, Anton had one sister three years his junior. He always describes her as extremely bright and creative, full of humor, attractive, socially popular and relatively free from "malicious tendencies." "So far as I can discover, our family record is relatively free from abnormalities such as those with which this study deals" is the way he begins his autobiography.

Brilliant but painfully shy, Boisen describes his social isolation as a youth and his struggle with instinctual impulses. During his college years both his grandfather Wylie and an uncle who had been Governor of South Dakota died and he writes: "These deaths removed the last significant men in the family, and left me feeling the pressure of a situation to which I was unequal."

Around Easter of the year he was 22 years old, he experienced an acute anxiety state. This was somewhat resolved by confessing his trouble to his mother who sent him to their pastor. This pastor helped him to accept his struggle and gave him the advice that it would always be necessary to fight for control of the instincts and that he must look to Christ for help and to some good woman. He was able to assimilate this brief period of intense conflict and to experience a new level of understanding and acceptance of himself which enabled him to socialize more and to invest himself in his work.

His college completed, he taught part time in high school and continued to take work in the university in the field of languages. Renewed internal conflict, stimulated by some of the French literature he read, caused him to make a decision to embark upon a new course, that of forester. This action had some continuity with his long-standing interest in the nature of the woods around Bloomington, an interest he had shared with his father. Thus it was that he went to Yale Forest School and then entered the United States Forest Service.

After making the decision to become a forester, he met Alice Batchelder, a native of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and a graduate of Smith College, at that time a secretary of the Young Women's Christian Association. Listening to her speak, Anton Boisen says that he immediately fell in love with her. Therein begins a story intertwined with the rest of his life and of hers. At first she was appalled at his interest and urged that it cease. However, he was extraordinarily persistent and at times in the long story of their life she seemed ready to say yes. Always precisely at this point something would come over him and he not only would muffle his chance but also would cause her to feel that they should