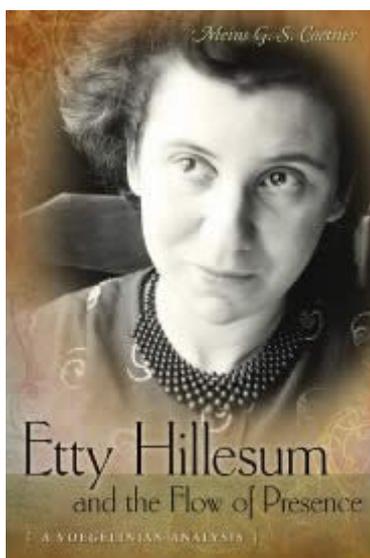




ETTY HILLESUM, MEDITATOR AND PEACE ACTIVIST (1914-1943)



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by Paul Harris

?God is not accountable to us, but we are to Him. I know what may lie in wait for us....and yet I find life beautiful and meaningful.?

Etty Hillesum who wrote these words in Amsterdam in 1942 was a young 28 year old Jewish woman and gifted writer who decided to write a diary during the German occupation of Holland. The diary portrays an inner transformation of an independent woman preoccupied with worldly pleasures and sensuality, into a person of great spiritual depth and wisdom. The diaries chronicle Etty's inner growth and have become an authentic classic of twentieth century spirituality.

In 1942 she voluntarily went to the German interment camp for Jews at Westerbork in Holland to serve those who were under arrest and detained. However on Sept. 8, 1943 she and her entire family were transported to Auschwitz. A letter written by an eyewitness describes her final moments on Dutch soil. This person says that as Etty stepped up to and into the dark car of the cattle train, crowded with men, woman and children, "she walked lightly, bearing the burden of these her people, yet caught in an inner calm. She had not been deserted by her God".

Another friend, who survived, saw her get on the train to Auschwitz and relates she was "talking happily, a kind word for everyone she met...full of sparkling humour. Then the shrill whistle when the train with a thousand victims moved out". She managed to throw a postcard out of the train, which a farmer found and mailed: "We left the camp singing," she said in the card. On November 30, 1943, she died at Auschwitz.

Her friends treasured her memory and after the war they tried to find a publisher for her lengthy manuscript which had been hidden for safe keeping. She had left careful plans for the survival of her diaries and letters but unaware that future generations would be able to read her testimony.

What do the diaries tell us? They begin on March 8, 1941 when Etty, a secular Jew, lives in Amsterdam and is going through a time of personal turmoil and emotional upheaval and feels she is in need of psychotherapy. She consults a psycho-therapist, a Jewish refugee from Germany named Julius Spier. Under the influence of Carl Jung, Spier believed that human well being and healing called for a spiritual dimension in one's life and to be healed one needed the courage to say "I believe in God". Spier introduced her to the Bible and St. Augustine and encouraged her to continue her readings on Dostoevsky and Rilke.

Etty falls in love with Spier. However in the process of her relationship she develops a religious sensibility which gives her daily diary entries an enormous spiritual dimension. The word "God" appears often in her entries and she develops an intense dialogue with the divine. But her dialogue leads her into meditation and prayerful silence. She records that in a conversation with Spier one day he said "you know meditation is beautiful". Etty then says "that sort of comment does not sound sentimental or mystical or extravagant when it comes from him, but serious and almost matter-of-fact. Next time I'll ask him, no doubt very childishly, "How does one meditate? Can I learn it too?"

In a diary entry of June 8th, 1941 Etty has begun to meditate. It reads as follows:

SUNDAY MORNING, 9.30. I think that I'll do it anyway: I'll ?turn inward? for half an hour each morning before work, and listen to my inner voice. Lose myself. You could also call it meditation. I am still a bit wary of that word. But anyway, why not? A quiet half-hour within yourself. It's not enough just to move your arms and legs and all the other muscles about in the bathroom each morning. We are body and spirit. And half an hour of exercises combined with half an hour of meditation can set the tone for the whole day.

But it's not so simple, that sort of ?quiet hour?. It has to be learnt. A lot of unimportant inner litter and bits and pieces have to be swept out first. Even a small head can be piled high inside with irrelevant distractions...the clutter is ever present. So let this be the aim of the meditation: to turn one's innermost being into a vast empty plain, with none of that treacherous undergrowth to impede the view. So that something of God can enter you, and something of ?Love? too.

However Etty's spiritual development through meditation did not lead her into a solitary withdrawal from life but into the thick of the world of activity and giving herself to others. She throws herself into concern for social justice, service to the suffering and oppressed and this continues until her death. She had made a conscious decision ?to share her peoples fate?.

Etty soon feels the need to free herself from the obsessive attachment to Spier. .However Spier dies in 1942 but Etty has already come to love the message more than the messenger. Eventually God becomes the most vital aspect of her life. In one of her diary entries she writes:

There is a deep well inside me, and in it God dwells...There are people who pray with their eyes turned to Heaven, they seek God outside themselves. And there are those who bow their heads and bury their faces in their hands. I think that they seek God inside.

Etty is one of the latter seeking God inside and she continues, ?All that is left is the will to yield myself up to God...a desire to kneel down sometimes pulses through my body or rather my body seems made and meant for the act of kneeling. Observers point out that Etty lived and died a Jew but her insights into the teaching of Jesus are deep and incisive and played a major role in her spiritual development.

Here are a few excerpts from Etty's diaries that Canadian theologian Gregory Baum, editor emeritus of the Canadian journal *The Ecumenist*, says ?are rare documents of religious faith and reflect a deep level of mysticism?

True peace will come only when every individual finds peace within themselves, when we have all vanquished and transformed our hatred for our fellow human brings into love one day. Perhaps that is asking too much, but it is, however, the only solution.

But I refresh myself from day to day at the original source, life itself, and I rest from time to time in prayer. And what those who say, ?you live too intensely,? do not know, is that one can withdraw into prayer as into a convent cell and leave again with renewed strength and with peace regained.

Truly my life is a long listening to myself and, to others and to God. And if I say that I listen, it is really God who listens inside me, the most essential and the deepest in me listening to the most essential and deepest in others. God to God.

And I know for certain that there will be a continuity between the life I have led and the life about to begin. Because my life is increasingly an inner one and the outer setting matters less and less.

I keep following my own inner voice even in this madhouse, with a hundred people chattering. There is a vast silence in me that continues to grow.

There is a really deep well inside me. And in it dwells God. Some-times I am there too. But more often stones and grit block the well, and God is buried beneath. Then He must be dug out again.

One ought to be able to live without books, without anything. There will always be a small patch of sky above, and there will always be enough space to fold two hands in prayer.

For once you have begun to walk with God, you need only keep on walking with Him and life becomes one long stroll.

I draw prayer round me like a dark protective wall, withdraw inside it as one might into a convent cell and then step outside again calmer and stronger and more collected again.

And isn't it true that one can pray anywhere, in a wooden barracks just as well as in a stone monastery, or indeed, anywhere on this earth where God, in these troubled times, feels like casting his likeness.

One must always carry a great silence within one, a silence, into which one can always withdraw, even in the midst of all the hustle and bustle and in the midst of the most animated conversation. One must always keep drawing fresh strength from within oneself...

On November 30, 1943, Etty died in a swirl of Zyklon B gas at Auschwitz. She had shared her peoples fate. The drop of water that had been Etty Hillesum fell into the ocean of love and returned to her God.

Peace & Justice

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