

Etty Hillesum 1914-1943

“Sometimes the most important thing in a whole day is the rest between two deep breaths, or the turning inward in prayer for five short minutes.” (Etty. P. 305)

Etty Hillesum was a Secular Dutch Jew unattached to a Synagogue but attached enough to her ethnic background to become one of the six million Jewish victims of the systematic human atrocity we call the Holocaust. On November 30th 1943 aged 29 Etty was murdered at Auschwitz. She left behind a remarkable document, her Diary, which along with letters she wrote from Westerbork Concentration Camp, was published unabridged in English in 2002.

Set against the relentless escalation of Nazi oppression of the Jews living in Holland, first against the running of their everyday lives, then deportation to Westerbork, where Etty voluntarily chose to work with the sick rather than go into hiding, and finally transportation and extermination at Auschwitz, Etty's Diary articulates her resilient and persistent love of life. On many levels Etty is writing a love story: between herself and her human lovers, between her and her family, friends, and fellow prisoners in the concentration camps and between her and all humanity. Encompassing these loves is the love between Etty and God: a love which stretches beyond her writing hand to enfold her readers too. In this love her own soul continues to grow even after her body had been given up to be burnt.

Described as ‘the most spiritually significant document of our age’ Etty's Diary is, for Rowan Williams, “a *Confessions of St Augustine* for our own day”. It expresses her inner-most desires sexual, literary, philosophical and spiritual and allows us to re-live her successful quest to find harmony between the outer world of everyday life, with all its joy and suffering, and the inner conflicts that introspection lays bear. In the process she created an ordered, disciplined life from what had been a chaotic jumble of conflicting drives and aspirations. The Diary records the transformation of a woman with a deep eroticism and vast intellect from a person with a self-confessed atheistic part to her which meant she could not pray or say the name of God, into a woman who did both all the time. Above all, it records her spiritual growth from a person with self-centred desires and anxiety into a woman who used her disciplined life in the service of others bringing what practical comforts and spiritual solace she could to those, like herself, marked out for death at Westerbork or Auschwitz.

Her prayers and her God were by no means conventional yet they sustained her in dire circumstances. ‘God’, she says, is a metaphor for ‘an approach to our greatest and most continuous inner adventure,’ the adventure of life itself. She uses the word ‘God’ to describe all that is ‘deepest and best in me’ and when she prays she says she conducts a ‘dialogue with what is deepest inside me, which, for the sake of convenience I call God.’ Standing at the point where humanism, Judaism and Christianity meet she offers us a truly ecumenical vision of the religious future in which love of life transcends any fear of suffering and death we might have so long as we find the courage to accept them as an integral part of life's beauty.

“Life is beautiful and meaningful too. It is meaningful even in its meaninglessness, provided one makes room in one's life for everything, and accepts life as one indivisible whole ...” (Etty p. 466)

Etty achieved her transformation, finding God's dwelling place within her, by disciplining her personality through prayer and meditation to be attentive to all that surrounded her. In the process of writing the Diary, she discovered the metaphors by which she could articulate her rich, capacious and hospitable inner life she called her 'soul's landscape'. This she carried with her where ever she went. But her spiritual self-disciplining never runs against the grain of life. She never lost her sense of humour and while she chides herself on many occasions for her lack of patience with herself she is always a gentle guide through the spiritual life ready to recognise the limits that being human places on our courage and fortitude. Consequently, she calls on us to learn to accept what she referred to as our pauses – times when our inner life goes temporarily awry – but never should we dwell on such moments. She also recognised that before any of us can love and understand others we must first love and understand ourselves. Love of self and love of others, for her, both deepen and originate in the love of God which we can encounter in ourselves if we listen hard enough. Such listening she could only describe using the German word 'hineinhorchen'. By this she meant an inner listening to oneself, to God, to others and to God in others producing an inner awareness which generates a love of life and of humanity.

If a saint is a person without fault then Etty, by her own admission, is no saint – her self-induced abortion and her contemporaneous sexual partnerships would, for many, bear testimony to that. If, however, a saint is a vehicle through which the address of God becomes audible to us; one in whom the eternal was so present in life that it announces itself in them such that they may be said to live on in God even though they are dead, then, Etty qualifies indeed. Her life became one long dialogue with God in which she would drop to her knees in prayer whenever she needed the strength to go on in circumstances of oppression and suffering we struggle to imagine. Her voluntary service for her fellow sufferers in the concentration camp at Westerbork is witness to the love she felt called to give and while she expressed her moral indignation against the perpetrators of her misery she refused to succumb to bitterness and hatred. By living without hatred or bitterness, even in the concentration camps, she believed she was preparing the way for a kinder and more loving future while remaining faithful to God within her.

She continuously wrote sagacious notes of advice to herself (and thus to us too) on ways of developing a deeper and richer spiritual life and it is tempting to quotes these but it is more tempting simply to invite you to read her for yourself.

To read Etty's Diary is to draw alongside her; to share in her physical and spiritual journey and, when the tragic circumstance of her biography forces a parting of the ways, we may recognise that Etty has inaugurated in our own biographical journey a spiritual transformation which attends to our own fears, bitterness and hatreds. We may recognise too a new courage to give our own lives to the service of love and learn to see suffering and death as parts of life not to be feared. Above all, we may find inscribed in our heart and in our mind the love and address of God.

"Once you have begun to walk with God, you need only keep on walking with Him and all of life becomes one long stroll. ..."

We lack a historical sense; forget that even those about to perish are part of history. I hate nobody. I am not embittered. And once the love of mankind has germinated in you it will grow without measure." (Etty. pp. 491-2)