

Community Circles

Your Deepest and Best with Rev. Melanie Eyre

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“There must be someone to live through it all ... and bear witness to the fact that God lived, even in these times. And why should I not be that witness?”

Patrick Woodhouse - ETTY HILLESUM: A LIFE TRANSFORMED

On Sunday we explored the extraordinary and luminous life of ETTY HILLESUM, a Dutch Jew who died at Auschwitz in November of 1943. Her story of transformation and faith, in the face of unspeakable horror and death, is one of the most inspiring I have ever read.¹

ETTY grew up in a household she described as chaotic. Her family was Jewish but nonobservant, and she had little if any religious training. Although she developed a life of profound faith, her search for her inner truth began not with religion or spirituality but with psychotherapy. Later, coming to understand that “reason alone was not enough,” she learned to connect with the depths of her inner world through silence and through listening, or as she called it “hearkening.” As she wrote “*One day I shall strike a balance between thinking and feeling. But this is my remedy: do not speak, do not listen to the outside world, but be perfectly still, try letting your innermost being resound, and listen to that. It is the only way.*” Through silence, prayer, and deep listening, ETTY developed the discipline needed to safeguard her inner life, her inner spaciousness. In so doing, she maintained her ability, even in the midst of death and despair, to see beauty, feel joy, experience spontaneous gratitude, and extend love and healing to others.

Your response? What does it mean to you, to be a steward of (or safeguard) your inner life? I find this concept very liberating. ETTY called her inner world her “soul landscape” – does that phrase resonate with you?

ETTY’s faith journey was driven entirely by her own lived experience, as well as her study of scripture and other diverse wisdom writings. When her bag was searched upon her arrival at Westerbork transit camp, she had with her a copy of the Bible, the Quran, and the Talmud. As she scrubbed floors, she read Meister Eckhardt. She treasured the work of Rainer Maria Rilke, loved the book of Matthew and the letters of Paul in the Christian scriptures, and studied Sufi wisdom as well. In this she was very modern – drawing wisdom from many different sources and perspectives to enrich her own journey.

¹ My primary resource for this talk was Patrick Woodhouse’s wonderful book referenced above in the quote. If you’d like to hear a talk he gave on ETTY HILLESUM, please follow this [link](#) (many thanks to Gay Crawford for finding this talk on YouTube!)

As time went on, Etty developed a sense of vocation, coming to believe that it was her destiny to witness and document the journey of her people during this horrific time. Many times she was offered a hiding place, and each time she refused. She saw so clearly the connection between all souls, and if her fellows were suffering how could she not join them?

This sense of profound connection, of belonging to others and to all of life, is what Etty saw as her “deepest and best,” and she called it God. She came to know that God was present when what was deepest and best in her communicated with the same in others – what mattered was the connection. This is why she refused to hate, why she remained convinced of the love and goodness at the heart of each of us, even in the hate-twisted faces of Nazi guards on the train platforms. She insisted on continuing to see the humanity in all of us, looking past what she called the ‘ugly masks of war.’

She put it this way: *‘I try to look things straight in the eye,’ she writes, ‘even the worst crimes, to discover the small, naked human being amid the monstrous wreckage caused by man’s senseless deeds.’*

She continued to see beauty, to have hope, to feel joy. She wrote:

“How strange. It is wartime. There are concentration camps. Small barbarity mounts upon small barbarity. I can say of so many of the houses I pass: here the son has been thrown into prison, there the father has been taken hostage, and an eighteen year old boy in that house over there has been sentenced to death. ... I know about the mounting human suffering. I know the persecution and oppression and despotism and the impotent fury and the terrible sadism. I know it all ... And yet – at unguarded moments, when left to myself, I suddenly lie against the naked breast of life, and her arms round me are so gentle and so protective, and my own heartbeat is difficult to describe: so slow and so regular and so soft, almost muffled, but so constant, as if it would never stop, and so good and merciful as well.

That is also my attitude to life, and I believe that neither war nor any other senseless human atrocity will ever be able to change it.”

What are your thoughts as you contemplate this extraordinary life? What inspiration do you draw from Etty Hillesum’s story? What are your questions?

As Patrick Woodhouse observed, Etty did not survive the violence, but in her life and legacy she surely triumphed over it. I encourage you to learn more about, and from, this luminous soul by reading her diaries and letters.

Here is the reading from last week, reflecting Etty’s ability to rest in the good and the eternal.

... I am filled with a sort of bountifulness, even towards myself; ... And a feeling of being at one with all existence. No longer: I want this or that, but: Life is great and good and fascinating and eternal, and if you dwell so much on yourself and flounder and fluff about, you miss the mighty eternal current that is life. It is in these moments – and I am so grateful for them – that all personal ambition drops away from me, that my thirst for knowledge and understanding comes to rest, and a small piece of eternity descends on me with a sweeping wingbeat.

From Ety: The Letters and Diaries of Ety Hillesum 1941–1943,