

Julian Norwich and the Process of Transformation by Veronica Mary Rolf

Julian of Norwich. Credit: Flickr/Matt Brown. CC BY 2.0.

Julian of Norwich was born in 1342. No stranger to violence and suffering, she grew up in a world ravaged by the Hundred Years' War between England and France and torn apart by the Great Papal Schism. She also lived through the Peasants' Revolt in 1381, during which thousands of disenfranchised tenant farmers and laborers marched all over England looting monasteries, burning records of their serfdom and debt, and killing their hated overlords. Most tragic of all, from the time Julian was six years old, she endured repeated outbreaks of the Great Pestilence - later termed the Black Death - which eventually killed more than half the population of Europe, some 50 million people. It was no less than apocalyptic.

In May of 1373 when Julian was 30, her body broke down. She became paralyzed and was near death. The local curate told her to fix her eyes on the crucifix. Suddenly all her pain was taken away and the figure of Christ on the cross appeared to come alive. For the next 12 hours, Julian entered into a profound mystical experience of Christ's sufferings and his transformation into glory. She received sixteen revelations and heard locutions that stayed with her for the rest of her life - especially Christ's personal reassurance that "Alle shalle be wele and alle shalle be wele and all manner of thing shalle be wele."

At first, Julian could not accept these words. How could she believe that 'all things would be well' when her own world was obviously falling apart? She was so tortured by the success of evil and the degradation of suffering that she had often wondered why "the beginning of sin had not been prevented. For then I thought all would have been wele." She dared to question the vision: "Ah, good lord, how might alle be wele for the great harm that has come by sin to thy creatures?" Julian's mental anguish was not just an excessive medieval preoccupation with sin; it was indicative of humanity's innate sense that our lives are terribly broken and that we don't know how to fix them. We simply cannot save ourselves from the messes we get into because of our pride, anger, selfishness, jealousy, greed and lies.

Surprisingly, Julian was told in a locution that sin could be "behovely" - that is, "useful," even "necessary"- because it forces us to realize our need for divine mercy and spiritual healing. She further understood that in God there is no wrath or blame - all the anger and recrimination are on our side. God shows only compassion and pity for human beings because of the inevitable suffering we have to endure as a result of our misdeeds. Julian became convinced that everyone is loved unconditionally by God. As she wrote:

"For our soul is so preciousely loved by him that is highest, that it overpasses the knowing

of all creatures: that is to say, there is no creature that is made that may know how much and how sweetly and how tenderly our maker loves us...And therefore we may ask of our lover, with reverence, all that we will."

This revelation filled Julian with immense compassion for her fellow human beings. She longed to bear witness to divine love, mercy, and the revelations she had experienced. Admittedly, Julian did not become 'politically active' in our contemporary sense. No woman in her time was allowed to be educated at university (i.e. Oxford or Cambridge), hold public office, instruct others, or preach from a pulpit. Lay people were forbidden to teach religion (except to their children). But if we consider that 'political' connotes selfless devotion to serving the 'body politic' and showing compassion to those in need, then Julian did become a force for social transformation. There were three things she decided to do: pray, counsel, and write.

Around 1390, Julian chose to be enclosed as an anchorite - literally "anchored" to the side of the church of St. Julian (no relation) in Norwich. There she lived for about 25 years in a small hermit's cell, attended by a maid who brought her food, clean clothing, parchment and ink. She devoted herself to prayer and contemplation, to counseling those who came to her anchorage window seeking spiritual direction, and to writing.

Julian worked diligently on several versions of the Long Text of her revelations (she had penned a Short Text in the 1370s). She developed a mystical theology of the Trinity; of the goodness of God reflected in a tiny hazelnut; of the lack of wrath or blame in God; of the godly will "that never assented to sin, nor never shall;" of the Great Deed that Christ will accomplish at the end of the world; of divine inspiration that is the ground of our beseeching in prayer; of the value of suffering; and of the 'motherhood' of God, so relevant to our time.

She realized that "as truly as God is our father, as truly is God our mother." By giving birth to humankind in blood and water on the cross and by nurturing and inspiring us throughout our lives, Mother Christ is the paradigm for all earthly mothers, caregivers, advisors, teachers, and volunteers; for all those who dedicate their lives to the works of mercy and social service. All the while, Julian searched for the deeper meaning of all the Lord's revelations. One day she was answered in prayer: "Know it well, love was his meaning." Divine love became the meaning of her life and her message to the world.

Although Julian was, by her own account, "unlettered" (she could not read or write Latin, the language of Scripture and theology), she was the first woman ever to write a book in the English language. She implored her readers to receive the revelations as if they had been shown to us, not her. She died sometime after 1416, and her writings were almost destroyed during the Reformation. Providentially, the Long Text was scurried away to France by recusant Benedictine nuns. It was not until 1910 that the Short Text finally resurfaced at a Sotheby's auction. Since then, Julian's reputation and influence have grown worldwide. The American mystic and activist Thomas Merton called Julian one of "the greatest English theologians," and former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams considered Julian's book to be "the most important work of Christian reflection in the English language."

What has Julian to tell us about the process of transformation? How can we work to make 'all things well' in our world without losing heart? Anyone who has ever served the poor, the persecuted, or the marginalized knows that the two greatest dangers are disillusionment and burnout. The problems are so vast and our efforts so small. In our frustration, we may try to dictate solutions instead of eliciting creative collaboration. We

become exhausted, infuriated, and sometimes feel betrayed. We question how we can continue when the odds seem stacked against us.

Julian would tell us that we must go into the “ground” of our being in order to “live contemplatively.” Like her, we must develop a daily practice in which we learn to rest and breathe in silence and stillness, becoming aware of the turbulence in our minds, releasing thoughts and letting go of our emotional attachment to those thoughts. We need to become ever more aware of being aware, in order to experience the deep interconnectedness of our own awareness with divine awareness. And then we must rely on divine awareness working in us and through us if we are to make a difference. We cannot do it alone. And we cannot do what others must do for themselves. We can only evaluate, advise, encourage, and empower.

Will such a contemplative practice transform the world? Not immediately. But it will transform us. Our love will go deeper, our patience will grow stronger, and our service will become more authentic and productive. We will be able to feel compassion for those who challenge us, and keep our balance in situations that threaten to undermine us. We will listen more attentively, evaluate opposing viewpoints more generously, and cooperate more willingly. We will recognize that the real work of transformation - whether of individuals or of nations - is divine work. Nevertheless, we humans play an indispensable part: every act of peace and loving service, and every word of kindness or forgiveness helps to make “alle manner of thing” well. The more we collaborate with the work of divine love, the more we will experience that love bearing fruit in our own lives and in the lives of others. As we are transformed, others will be too.

The revelation that “alle shalle be wele” does not provide an instant cure-all for our personal, family, and global problems. These words are a prophecy and a promise - of an ultimate transformation. Eventually, divine love will convert every evil into good, every inequality into justice, and every suffering into joy. However, we will not be able to see how this will happen until we have been fully transformed from within; until we have been recreated through death and rebirth into the divine dimension. Then at last we will be able to understand how “alle manner of thing shalle be wele” - because the divine dimension is love.