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Courtesy: Julian of Norwich (1 John 4: 7-12)
Sarah Bachelard

According to Richard Rohr, the two prime paths to transformation are ‘great love and great suffering’. This is because, he says, ‘only love and suffering are strong enough to break down our usual ego defenses, ... and open us up to Mystery ... [L]ike nothing else, [they] exert the mysterious chemistry that can transmute us from a fear-based life into a love-based life’.¹ In fact, it seems these two paths of love and suffering are one – twin sides of the same coin, necessarily interpenetrating. This is certainly the dynamic we see in the life of Julian of Norwich. Out of great suffering she entered into a profound encounter with divine love, and then articulated the meaning of her experience in one of the most beautiful texts in our tradition.

We don’t actually know her name. She’s called by the name of the church in Norwich, St Julian’s, where she lived the last part of her life as an anchoress, enclosed in a tiny cell attached to the church’s wall.² She was known for her wisdom and discernment, and people used to seek her out for counsel.

Julian was born in 1342. In 1373, ‘when I was half way through my thirty-first year’, she writes, ‘God sent me an illness which prostrated me for three days and nights. On the fourth night I received the last rites of the Holy Church as it was thought I could not survive till day. After this I lingered two more days and nights, and on the third night I was quite convinced that I was passing away – as indeed were those about me’.³ The parish priest came again, and gave her a crucifix on which to fix her gaze. Her sight

¹ Richard Rohr, *The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics See* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2009), p.122.

² Kerrie Hide, *Gifted Origins to Graced Fulfillment: The Soteriology of Julian of Norwich* (Collegeville, MI: Liturgical Press, 2001), p.5.

³ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, trans. Clifton Wolters (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), Chapter 3, p.64.

began to fail, and (she writes) 'the room became dark about me, as if it were night, except for the image of the cross which somehow was lighted up ... Apart from the cross everything else seemed horrible as if it were occupied by fiends'.⁴

In this extremity of physical and spiritual suffering, as her breath became shorter and she knew 'for certain that I was passing away', suddenly her pain abated and though she still believed she would die, it came to her mind to ask to share in her own body the passion of Christ, so that his compassion could be hers. She had a vision, what she calls a 'showing' of the blood trickling down his face from the crown of thorns and 'at the same moment the Trinity filled me full of heartfelt joy'.⁵ Then, she writes, 'our Lord showed me spiritually how intimately he loves us. I saw that he is everything that we know to be good and helpful. In his love he clothes us, enfolds and embraces us; that tender love completely surrounds us, never to leave us'.⁶

This, at least, is how she recounts the experience, the first of 16 'showings' or 'visions' in her *Revelations of Divine Love*. The text of this work comes to us in two versions. The short text is generally thought to have been written by Julian immediately after her illness and visionary experiences. The longer text was composed over the next 20 years, as Julian reflected on and prayed about the meaning of the *showings* and was answered, she says, 'in spiritual understanding'.⁷ What's so significant about this text is that it offers not simply a record of her visions, nor instructions for prayer or the spiritual life, but the working through of the profound theological implications of her experience of divine love.

The heart of everything for Julian is the link between the Paschal Mystery and the love of the Trinity, since the self-emptying love of Christ and his suffering for us reveals, in her words, that 'love is our Lord's meaning'.⁸ We are created in love and for love; love

⁴ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, Chapter 3, p.65.

⁵ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, Chapter 4, p.66.

⁶ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, Chapter 5, pp.67-68.

⁷ Hide, *Gifted Origins to Graced Fulfillment*, p.14.

⁸ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, Chapter 86, p.212.

is our beginning and our end. And Julian speaks of the quality of this divine love in very striking ways – it is, she says, both ‘homely’ and ‘courteous’.⁹

By homely, she means ‘familiar’, intimate and tender. Homeliness evokes the sense of being ‘at home’, belonging to the same household – Julian draws on images of being clad in God, wrapped, enfolded and embraced by God, never to be turned away. The notion of ‘courtesy’ is drawn from the mediaeval tradition of courtly love and reflects her sense of how God responds to human sin. Just as a noble-minded lover will not dishonour the beloved, nor will God dishonour us even when we are in our sins. God will not blame or shame us. ‘And this is a supreme friendship of our courteous Lord’, she writes, ‘that he protects us so tenderly whilst we are in our sins’.¹⁰ Kerrie Hide notes: ‘Courteous love is grace offered in friendship that draws humanity into union with the Trinity’.¹¹ We are invited back to our origin in God, ‘to be one in bliss’, ‘knitted’ and ‘one-d’ in God, sharing in the same homely, courteous love which constitutes the relations between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Julian’s understanding of divine love as friendly, almost domestic, has significant theological implications. One is that it’s natural for her to speak of the ‘motherhood’ as well as the ‘fatherhood’ of God, and even of the motherhood of Jesus. Christ brings us into union with the life of the Trinity by giving birth to redeemed humanity through his suffering. She writes: ‘our true Mother Jesus, he alone bears us for joy and for endless life, blessed be he’.¹² And motherly qualities constitute in her understanding the very nature of God. ‘To the property of motherhood,’ Julian writes, ‘belongs nature, (kind) love, wisdom and knowledge, and this is God’ which means, in fact, that this ‘fine and lovely word “mother” ... cannot truly be said of anyone or to anyone except of him and to him who is the true Mother of life and of all things’.¹³

⁹ Hide, *Gifted Origins to Graced Fulfillment*, p.48.

¹⁰ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, Chapter 40, p.121.

¹¹ Hide, *Gifted Origins to Graced Fulfillment*, p.51.

¹² Hide, *Gifted Origins to Graced Fulfillment*, p.135.

¹³ Hide, *Gifted Origins to Graced Fulfillment*, p.135.

A second theological implication of Julian's overwhelming sense of God's homely, courteous, motherly love is to do with how she understands sin and so, salvation. She's puzzled about sin. If everything has its origin in God who is love, how can sin exist? What is it? Ultimately she understands it as having no substance of itself – it's unnatural, a kind of anti-being.¹⁴ What's more, she considers that our falling into sin is not so much a matter of willful disobedience, but a kind of accident – a clumsiness and blindness. She tells the parable of a servant, who rushes off to do his lord's will and falls into a ditch from which he cannot extricate himself. He is injured, weakened and distressed – all the while unaware that in fact his lord is quite close by. Her view is that: 'Disoriented by sin, human beings forget their natural love for God and become blind to the experience of divine love'.¹⁵ But Julian sees that this fall into sin does not provoke God to anger – in fact, it cannot since in God there is no anger. Rather, God beholds the servant compassionately, mercifully, working for his restoration.

So the basic dynamic of salvation for Julian is not about redeeming our depraved and sinful nature. It's more to do with recalling us to our essential goodness in God. This doesn't mean that sin is not serious and awful. The extremity of Christ's suffering reveals the depth of the world's suffering and alienation from God. 'Sin is the cause of all this pain', she says. Even so, our 'good Lord comforts us', saying 'all will be well, and every kind of thing will be well. These words', she says, were revealed most tenderly, showing no kind of blame to me or to anyone who will be saved'.¹⁶

Julian lived in troubled times and often, she writes, 'I beheld the woe that there is here'. She was born shortly before the beginning of the Hundred Year's War between England and France, during which English agriculture declined, resulting in failed crops and famine. With the economy collapsing and tension growing between labourers and feudal lords, the peasants rebelled and then were cruelly suppressed. And there were at

¹⁴ Hide, *Gifted Origins to Graced Fulfillment*, p.117.

¹⁵ Hide, *Gifted Origins to Graced Fulfillment*, p.119.

¹⁶ Hide, *Gifted Origins to Graced Fulfillment*, p.98.

least three outbreaks of the Black Death in Julian's lifetime, with Norwich particularly hard hit. The city's population of 13,000 was halved and the aftermath was so devastating that Norwich had barely regained its population over 200 years later.¹⁷ So how could she, any more than we in our war-wracked and ecologically devastated world, seriously proclaim that 'all will be well'?

Well, it's a theological statement – it's not optimism. For Julian, the trust that 'all will be well' is simply what follows from her radical experience of the goodness and tender courtesy of God. If God is all in all, and Trinitarian love permeates the whole of reality, then nothing ultimately can harm us. Suffering continues, but to know as Julian knew the depth of God's love is to live secure in love and bliss, and to share in God's compassionate friendship for all who find themselves still far from home.

¹⁷ Hide, *Gifted Origins to Graced Fulfillment*, p.11.