

The Julian Lecture 2000

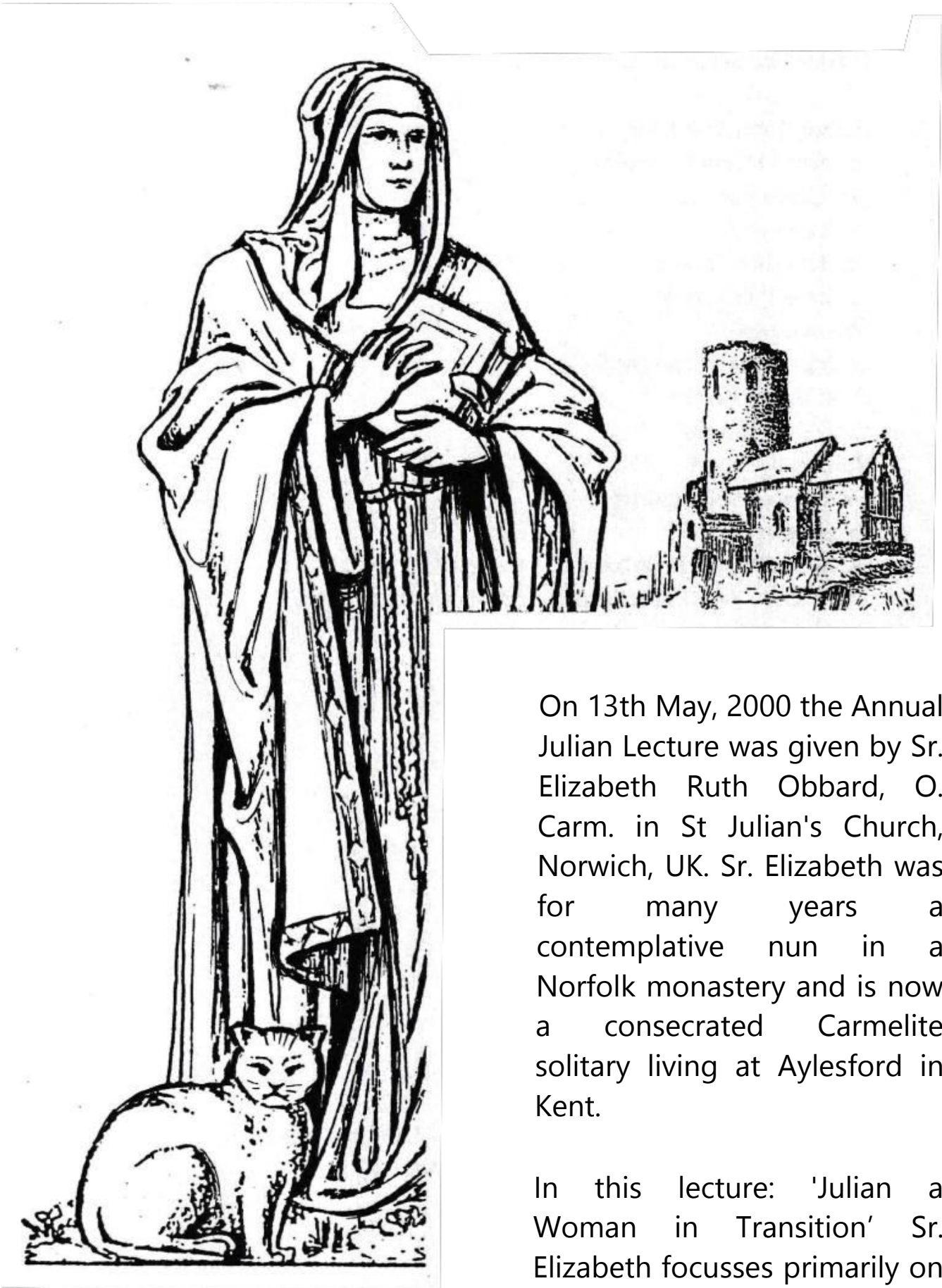
Julian: A Woman in Transition



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On 13th May, 2000 the Annual Julian Lecture was given by Sr. Elizabeth Ruth Obbard, O. Carm. in St Julian's Church, Norwich, UK. Sr. Elizabeth was for many years a contemplative nun in a Norfolk monastery and is now a consecrated Carmelite solitary living at Aylesford in Kent.

In this lecture: 'Julian a Woman in Transition' Sr. Elizabeth focusses primarily on

Julian's three requests from God. One was a near-death experience that heralded a 'new beginning' in her life. This is explored in the context of women's development, as we see Julian discovering herself and God even more deeply as she ponders her Revelations of Divine Love.

[1] **Julian - A Woman in Transition**

First I would like to introduce myself. As you know, my name is Elizabeth and, after many years as a contemplative nun in a Norfolk monastery I am now a consecrated Carmelite solitary living at Aylesford in Kent. The new canon law of the Roman Catholic Church (Canon 603) recognises both lay and consecrated hermits, of which the latter profess the vows of religion and lead their lives under the direction of the diocesan bishop. I come into this category except that my vows were made into the hands of the Prior Provincial of the Carmelites of the Ancient Observance on June 24th last year.

I am in some ways like the very first women of Carmel who led lives of dedication and prayer beside the friars of the Order before the Carmelite nuns 'proper' were founded in 1445. Indeed there was one such woman in this very city of Norwich - Emma Stapleton - who was enclosed beside the Church of the Norwich Whitefriars about five years after Julian's death. Another Carmelite woman solitary was Julian's contemporary, Blessed Joan of Toulouse, who was said to have taught the young friars from her cell as well as praying for them. A woman teaching friars - almost unheard of! No wonder her memory has somehow been relegated to the margins of the Order's history!

So although I am not an anchoress (or I would not be here talking to you today) I am a solitary rather in the mode of the medieval hermits such as Richard Rolle, who were not strictly tied to one place. However, both men and women who lived an eremitical life in the Middle Ages, whether in anchorholds or out of them, had the freedom to develop their own rhythm of prayer and service according to the particular attractions of grace - of which more later.

But for now, back to Julian. Since first coming to live in Norfolk I have been captivated by this wonderfully 'whole' woman; and in this talk I want to concentrate on an area of her life that obviously fascinates and has personal immediacy for me her transitional journey into solitude, which I see as possibly stemming from the requests she makes of God.

These requests are enumerated in a kind of prologue to her book before she launches out into the description and interpretation of her mystical Revelations, which she terms 'a' Revelation of Love, since everything she learns can be ^[2]summed up in that one word. Much of what I have to say may be speculative, but nonetheless I believe it to be valid speculation that may open up further insights into the remarkable woman who lived here in this place as an anchoress more than 600 years ago.

Julian's Requests

Psychologists no less than spiritual writers are quick to point out that what we want tells us a lot about the kind of people we are. Where our treasure is our heart will be too, says Jesus. To put it another way round: if we want to know what we really want, look at what our heart desires, where it has placed its 'treasure'. If I want wealth, beauty, fame, a figure like Twiggy (that dates me doesn't it!) or something equally ephemeral, then that tells me what I value: money, physical attractiveness, success in business or whatever. If I want to be known as a religious person I may translate these things into a rather different idiom but they are equally 'worldly' and worthless: such things as an honourable position in the Church, a reputation for austere living, the security of a religious community

that provides for my needs. Or I may be wanting more lasting values: peace and harmony in the family, leisure to pursue intellectual work, the search for truth and beauty. What we want tells us a lot about who we are.

That reminds me of a story about a young man who, à la Aladdin bought a lamp from a second hand shop. When he began to polish it up a genie appeared and told him he could have three requests - whatever he chose. The young man thought a while and said, "Would it be possible to have a million pounds to spend?" "No problem", said the genie; he waved his hand and pronounced, "You now have a million pounds waiting for you in your bank. Use it however you like." The young man thought again. "How about a big selection of clothes for every occasion? Can I have that?" "Of course." said the genie. He waved his hand and pronounced: "If you go to your room you will find an enormous wardrobe and chest of drawers packed with clothes of all kinds for every eventuality. Go out and have a good time."

Well, what should the young man ask for next? He had one wish left. He racked his brains and then thought of something even more important to him. "Would it be possible," he asked, "for you to make me irresistible to women?" "I can do it, but are you sure that's what you really want?" asked the genie. ^[3]"Quite sure", he replied. "Very well." said the genie. Again he waved his hand, and the young man found himself turned into a box of Black Magic chocolates! Ultimately, what we want is what we think will make us happy. And above all, what the human heart wants is to love and be loved. Usually, if we are looking for other things it is because we think that in some way these things will make us more attractive to others or more worthy of love. This innate hunger of the human heart is what advertising is always playing upon. And we know how people,

including ourselves, can be looking for love in all the wrong places. Looking for fulfilment where it can never be found, wanting things that we think will make us happy but which, when we have them, only make us more restless and dissatisfied.

What Julian asks for in her three requests then gives us an inkling of what she considers to be for her happiness. They tell us something of the kind of person she is.

The First Request

Julian tells us she had asked God for three things:

First - an experience of the Passion - not to see in order to believe like Thomas in the gospels she already believes. But she wants to see more so as to understand more. She doesn't want her knowledge of the sufferings of Christ to be merely a knowledge of the head but of the heart and feelings too. Inasmuch as we truly love another we want to enter into the loved one's world as completely as possible with mind, heart and soul. Julian is a woman who takes the Passion seriously and wants to know it 'from the inside' as it were, and not just through pictures. This is her first request:

It seemed to me that I had some feeling for the Passion of Christ, but still I desired to have more by the grace of God. I thought that I wished that I had been at that time with Christ's lovers, so that I might have seen with my own eyes the Passion which our Lord suffered for me, so that I might have suffered with him as others did who loved him. Therefore I desired a bodily sight, in which I might have more knowledge of our

Saviour's pains, and of the compassion of our Lady and of all his true lovers who were living at that time and saw his pains, for I would have been one of them and have suffered with^[4] them. I never desired any other sight of God or revelation, until my soul should be separated from the body, for I believed that I should be saved by the mercy of God. This was my intention because I wished afterwards, because of that revelation, to have a truer recollection of Christ's Passion.

The Second Request

The second Request is more unusual. Julian asks for the gift of reaching the threshold of death without actually dying. What she seems to want is a new beginning, a sacramentalised experience which will usher in a definitive transition in her life:

There seemed to come into my mind with contrition - a free gift which I did not seek - a desire of my will to have of God's gift a bodily sickness to be so severe that it might seem mortal, so that I might receive all the rites which Holy Church has to give me, whilst I myself should think that I was dying. and everyone who saw me would think the same, for I wanted no comfort from any human earthly life in that sickness. I wanted to have every kind of pain, bodily and spiritual, which I should have had if I died, every fear and temptation from devils, and every other kind of pain except the departure of the spirit. I intended this because I wanted to be purged by God's mercy, and afterwards live more for his glory because of that sickness; because I hoped that this would be my reward when I should die, because I desired soon to be with my God

and my Creator... When I was young I desired to have this sickness when I was thirty years old.

Thirty was close to mid-life in an era when the life span was much shorter than now. By thirty, youth was considered over and maturity well established. In her vision Julian sees Mary as 'meek, young of age, and little older than a child, as she was when she conceived'. In other words, Mary is at the age of a girl when first given in marriage, only just past childhood. The fourteenth century acknowledged no such phase as adolescence. The rite of passage from child to adult, usually marriage or religious profession, took place without any intervening years of freedom.

In this second gift, which Julian only desires with the proviso (as with the first) ^[5]that it should be God's will to grant it, she wants, with sorrow for her sins, to have a near-death experience. She tells us she asks this so as better to live out the time left to her before her natural death. In typical mid-life parlance therefore, Julian has in mind the life remaining to her, rather than thinking in terms of life stretching ahead of her.

It makes me wonder why this request for a new beginning is so important to Julian. It is something not unknown (although taking a slightly different form) in other mystics. Teresa of Avila was 37 when she pinpointed her moment of conversion. After years of prevaricating between fervour and easygoingness as a nun she came one day upon an image of Jesus scourged at the pillar, and her heart was touched in such a way that it marked a watershed in her spiritual development. After this encounter there was no more turning back on the road to union with God. Angela of Foligno was about 35 when she embarked on the path of penitential living that would culminate in a series of revelations revolving around the passion of Christ. In

both these women the turning point of their spiritual lives was linked with sorrow for past neglect and the desire to 'begin again' while time still remained. And in both, as with Julian, there was an encounter with the living Christ in his passion which gave their nascent love the impetus it needed to grasp the moment of grace when it was offered.

Obviously we know far less of Julian's life than we do of the other women just mentioned, but the fact that the request came 'with contrition' clearly shows its importance to her. Why was it so important? I would like to suggest that it might point to the fact that, as with Teresa and Angela, Julian knew that in some way she had failed in her early years and subconsciously wanted to make a new start marked by a real and sacramentalised 'death' to the past.

In Julian's writings we know that the question of sin was one which caused her concern. She comes back to it again and again in all its mystery and complexity. But in the end she could only keep saying that she now 'saw' in some way that God does not apportion blame. God is not angry. Sin is part of the picture and part of the growth process that is inherent in all life. And in the end, although we cannot see how, God wants us to be comforted because 'All shall be well'. In the same vein Teresa of Avila could exclaim that her whole life was a proclamation of the 'mercies of the Lord'; everything was affirmed and gathered up into Christ, including her sins and mistakes which^[6] had helped to make her the woman she was.

Julian tells us herself that she was, like Teresa, a dedicated woman who had given herself to God in some way during her youth. Why then the desire for such a drastic cleansing', coming to her as it did with 'a sense of sorrow'? Had she tried her vocation as a nun but

been unable to manage the pressures of community life and so left the cloister?

Did she have feelings of inadequacy because a marriage had not been all it should or could have been?

Or was it that she had actually committed some grave sin, always a possibility in those who take their religion over-seriously when young and have high ideals that do not take into account the gradualness of human and spiritual development.

Personally I think we may be able to find some hint of Julian's early experience when she alights on the story of St. John of Beverley in chapter 38 of the *Long Text*. In the same chapter she joyfully enumerates examples in Scripture to show that sinners can find honour in their shame. There is a corresponding joy according to the victory won by such as King David, the Magdalene, Peter and Paul, Thomas and others. These are all mentioned in the Short Text, but in the Long Text Julian suddenly seems to find a new and even more encouraging example in St John of Beverley. Citing a story that has not come down to us relating to this saint's life she writes as though deeply consoled. Julian sees Bishop John as a kind neighbour and acquaintance with whom she can identify, for:

In his youth and tender years he was a beloved servant of God, greatly loving and fearing him. And nevertheless, God allowed him to fall, mercifully protecting him so that he did not perish or lose any time; and afterwards God raised him to many more times more grace, and for the contrition and meekness that he had as he lived, God has given him in heaven manifold joys, exceeding what he would have had had

he not sinned or fallen. (Chapter 38).

I would like to posit that Julian discovered a special affinity with this saint who had given himself to God in youth, been unable to preserve the momentum, and fallen in some unspecified way. Elsewhere God says to Julian, maybe to reassure her, that her 'trying' was what mattered, not her success, when he ^[7]says 'I thank you for your service and your labour in your youth' (chapter 14). God is not judging her on her failure but her effort. He accepts her self-gift, however inadequate. In fact, youth itself is no guarantee of a place in heaven. The same reward is given to the one who turns to God even at the last moment. All will receive the bliss of being thanked by a loving, not a judging, Lord.

The Third Request

Another hint that Julian may have fallen notably short of her ideals at some point is that the chapter which follows on the story of St John of Beverley and other sinners who ultimately win the victory, is obliquely concerned with Julian's third request - for the wounds of contrition, compassion and longing for God.

After speaking of sin as a sharp scourge in Chapter 39, Julian notes the acceptance of bodily sickness sent as a penance, and all the contempt, shame and humiliation that accompanies illness as a result of sin (was she thinking here of the paralysing, slow dying she had been through?) Then she writes:

Our good Lord protects us with the greatest of loving care when it seems to us that we are almost forsaken and

abandoned because of our sins and because we see that we have deserved it. And because of the meekness that we obtain from this, we are raised very high in God's sight by his grace. And also God in his special grace visits whom he will with great contrition, and also with compassion and true longing for him, so that they are suddenly delivered from sin and pain, and taken up into bliss and made equal with the saints. By contrition we are made clean, by compassion we are made ready, and by true longing for God we are made worthy. These are three means, as I understand, through which all souls came to heaven, those, that is to say, who have been sinners on earth and will be saved. (Chapter 39)

Again the above paragraph is not in the short text, as if long pondering had clarified Julian's own thought on her third request for three wounds. She realises that the desire came from God as a gift because of her previous sin, and she adds that our falling does not hinder God's loving, for God is more powerful than all our enemies:

So sins are forgiven by grace and mercy, and our soul is honourably received ^[8]in joy, as it will be when it comes into heaven, as often as it comes by the operation of grace in the Holy Spirit and the power of Christ's Passion. (Ch. 40)

We are, as it were, wounded beings who need healing, not condemnation. Now a wound is a way into the body that has to be opened from the outside. We need to be wounded, as John of the Cross would say, in order to realise our need for healing, our need for mercy and grace. We cannot do this for ourselves. It is pure gift.

It is important to remember the 'giftedness' of grace in our days of self-help spirituality. If we are not careful we can confuse spiritual

progress with emotional/psychological wholeness as if the two were the same thing. If we expect growth in the spiritual life to be something that can be learned, a technique to be equated with the power to take charge of our own lives, then we are mistaken. True spiritual growth takes place when we acknowledge our basic poverty and need for God. We are sinners who beg to be transformed from within, not merely changed from without. We need the gift-wounds of contrition, compassion and longing whoever we are and whatever our personal history.

The Second Request & Julian's Transitional Experience

I want to look now more specifically at Julian's second request which I see as being more important than we might previously have thought. As I have already said, it seems to be an explicit prayer for a sacramentally validated 'new beginning'. The fact that Julian says she had forgotten about it with the passing of time does not diminish its importance, for we know that our subconscious is always at work; and when what she had asked for came to pass she clearly remembered it.

Julian begins her book with an account of her requests followed by a vivid description of the near-death experience that divided her existence into two distinct phases the time before and after her Revelation of Love (or Shewings). The remainder of her life would be spent teasing out the meaning of all that happened to her in those few packed hours when, hovering between ^[9]life and death, she received a sight of (and insight into) the crucified and risen Jesus. It was truly a rite of passage that inaugurated a further stage in her life.

By it she was set on course for a new way of understanding God, herself and the mysteries of faith.

After coming face to face with death, Julian enters into a different understanding of life. All that she has held precious hitherto is seen in perspective, the perspective of the whole world contained in a tiny object the size of a hazelnut. What can she do except cry out in the words of her famous prayer 'God of your goodness, give me yourself for you are enough for me'. Unlike those who, as T.S. Eliot says, 'have the experience but miss the meaning' Julian has the experience and spends a life time fathoming the meaning it contains.

We can see Julian's reception of the Last Sacraments *in extremis* as one of those key moments of conversion which herald a time of transition. Youthful transitions such as marriage or religious Profession which will give our life a definitive shape are expected on schedule, as it were, and are therefore generally supported and accepted by society. They are also liturgically celebrated and blessed in the context of the Church and our faith community.

Transitions that occur in later life are lonelier to bear and much more confusing: adapting after a sudden death when one is unprepared for the loss of a loved partner for example, coping with an unexpected redundancy, the breakup of a marriage, discovering that our previous values or aims have to come under careful scrutiny. Times of transition can lead to new lifestyles in conformity with new insights, or a coming back to one's previous path in a new way or with differently appropriated choices.

Nothing is so powerful an experience as that of near-death, especially when, as in Julian's case, it is linked to a general absolution from all past sins. Those who have looked death in the face and

returned to speak of it, bear this out. In her illness Julian confronts the possibility of bodily annihilation. It is in passing through her mortal illness that she is set on course for discovering a new purpose and direction in the life that remains to her. She now wants to live and communicate her insights. She sees things from a new perspective. God has granted her desire for a unique sacramental confession and anointing, ^[10] coupled with a sight of the living, loving, crucified Christ. She is born anew after whatever had gone wrong or whatever she *thought* she had done wrong. She knows experientially, as do others who have gone to the brink and been reprieved at the last moment, that life is good, life is precious, and that each moment is both gift and task.

However, Julian must still decide on her response to what has been 'given' in grace. In doing so she passes from the self-regard and egocentricity of youth to a new maturity where the other (either God or her fellow Christians) is the focus of her attention. She adopts an ethic of care and connectedness rather than self-serving concerns or spiritual isolation.

The psychologist Carol Gilligan, who has made a special study of women, writes that women who pass through mid-life transitions can expect to see themselves in distinctive relationships of connection. The natural desire to please and win approval shifts to the helping that is responsible, chosen, and becomes an anchor of personal integrity and strength. For women there is a connection between relationships and responsibility. A woman cares and connects with others in her maturity. The origins of female aggression lie in a failure of connectedness. My own experience bears this out.

Generally speaking, women do not expect to initiate, they expect to respond to what is given, what is relational, what is 'gift' in the other.

Women know themselves as interdependent rather than independent. This comes through in Julian's writings at every turn. Boundaries between mother and child, God and ourselves, ourselves and others, the good and the sinner are intertwined and interrelated. She is able to hold problems in tension without forcing an unnatural solution: the problems of universal salvation and sin, of rejection of grace and the prevalence of mercy, of our oneness in Christ and our individual responsibility.

Julian can afford to be so fully pacific in her approach because she feels connected to God, to pain, to others, to the communion of saints. She reflects a God who is relational, totally non-violent, infinitely compassionate.

The Whiteheads define a crisis point as 'a difficult developmental challenge concerning how to be with others (intimacy), how to be creative and caring ^[11](generativity) and how to make sense of life (integrity). Our experience of these challenges is often triggered by a 'marker event', a particular occurrence that invites serious reflection and, possibly, reorientation. It could well be that the period before her thirty-first year was, for Julian, a period of growing inner confusion and disorientation, culminating in the reception of the Last Sacraments in the belief that she was actually dying.

In moving through this acute phase of development Julian gives herself the time to explore its implications. Her view of God matures. She gains in natural compassion, in understanding what contrition is really about, and how sin is part of the larger picture. She learns how longing for God is translated into prayer that is persevering and God-centred.

Such transitional periods by which we develop can also lead to new choices. Teresa of Avila finally emerged from her own transition empowered to inaugurate the reform of Carmel; Angela of Foligno, after a long-drawn-out anguish comprising eighteen steps of conversion, chose a semi-eremitical lifestyle in accord with her particular emphasis on penance and prayer. Julian most probably chose the life of an anchoress following the Revelation which turned her own life upside-down.

Faith demands that we embrace our particular human history and carry it forward by constant choices that make sense of our life task. There is always the peril of foreclosure or regression.

Julian could have reverted to 'life as usual'. She could have accepted what she 'saw' as a grace that passes while life goes on as before. But she did not do this. She gave to her insights all her powers of mind, soul and body for the rest of her life. Being faithful to the law of her being she was willing to pay the price of her vocation.

Jung writes:

Not only the causal motive necessity - but conscious moral decision must lend its strength to the process of building the personality. If the first is lacking, then the alleged development is a mere acrobatics of the will: if the second it will get stuck in unconscious automatism... What is it in the end^[12] that induces a person to go their own way?... It is what is commonly called vocation... True personality is always a vocation and puts its trust in God Vocation acts like a law of God from which there is no escape... The original meaning of 'to have a vocation' is 'to be addressed by a voice. The clearest examples of this are to be found in the Old Testament prophets... Vacation, or the

feeling of it, is not, however, the prerogative of great personalities; it is appropriate to the small ones all the way down to the 'midget' personalities.²

One could say that Julian's Revelation was causal, forced upon her in her state of extreme weakness; but Julian still had to *choose* (i.e. by conscious moral decision) how to respond, and whether or not to let her Shewings define her future path. In this respect Julian seems to be very aware that what she learned in the course of the Shewings was to be the vocational imperative of her life henceforth. She was called to communicate what she had understood, understand it ever more deeply, and she was to do this not as someone 'outside' the common run of her fellow Christians but as one of them.

One of the means by which we can marshal our thoughts when the way ahead is uncertain is to write things down. The very action of putting thoughts, feelings, experiences, on paper objectifies them. Lines of connection gradually emerge as we grow in understanding ourselves and God's ways in our regard. This has certainly been my own experience. In times of turmoil - *write*. Allow what is deepest inside to rise up and be recorded. Gradually patterns will surface and when it is time to take a step it will be made known. There is no such thing, as Julian herself says, as luck or chance, there is only God's providence.

When Julian began to write the short version of her Shewings she was close in time to what had transpired. She goes into detail about her death bed, her mother's presence, how she felt, how the living Christ bled and everything seemed drenched in blood. She would need time to assimilate what had happened and choose her way. She needed time to *herself* before she could give time to others. Likewise in my own transition to a new way of living solitude I had to draw

back and concentrate on my own inner processes for a while, really look and discern where they might be leading me. Only when I had done that did a way forward become more clear, and when that way opened ^[13]up for me I was ready to grasp the opportunity. In such a manner I suspect Julian, after taking the necessary time of withdrawal for herself, could move on to a new way of life that again was to be validated by a liturgical ceremony, the way of an anchoress.

Life in an anchorhold

In the fourteenth century, when Julian embraced the anchoritic life, it had become predominantly lay in character: that is, the inhabitants of anchorholds were generally lay men or women and not professed members of a religious Order as has been common formerly. The mendicant movement of the thirteenth century had made spirituality accessible to the masses and the Third Orders attached to the Franciscans, Dominicans, and to a lesser extent the Carmelites and Augustinians, had encouraged a choice of many forms of dedicated life outside the confines of the official cloister.

Among the Franciscans the anchoress Veridiana and the semi-recluse and spiritual pilgrim Angela of Foligno are cases in point. Among the Carmelites Joan of Toulouse lived a life of prayer beside the friars in that town, and another woman, Emma Stapleton died in a cell attached to the Carmelite church in Norwich in 1422. An anchoress, unlike a male hermit who could move around if he so chose, was 'anchored' to a particular place, but she was far freer than a nun of the same period. She retained her independence, and could respond to the attractions of grace according to her own personal calling. It was often a good choice for mature women who could be financially

supported without too much difficulty, and would have developed the necessary self-discipline to sustain their life-direction. Some, as we know, were unable or unwilling to persevere (as witnessed by papers relating to the anchoress Christine of Shere near Guildford), but most would have accepted the lack of movement for the sake of the privacy and relative freedom of the anchorhold.

There is an axiom that a person doesn't choose solitude, solitude chooses them. Like any vocation it carries with it a note of necessity. Recent research by an Australian priest on modern hermits has found a wide range of people committed to the eremitical life. They also typically go through two stages, first a radical pulling back from others, secondly a beginning of service (or ^[14]stewardship). Many contemporary hermits are also lay. The lay solitary, such as Julian seems to have been, far from being a quasi-religious out of place in the world, is one who seeks solitude with God in the midst of the world, indeed in communion with the world. As our researcher wrote towards the end of his paper, and after interviews with many present day hermits, 'What is important for the person so called is, not to strive to conform to a certain definition of a hermit, but to seek to answer the call to be alone with God in the given conditions of his/her life.' ²

Julian seems to have been very aware of a call to communicate her revelations to her fellow-Christians. She was very much one of them. She was not destined to found an Order or fulfil an official teaching role in the Church. She did not have to dissipate her energy on non-essentials. She does not exhibit the self-doubt so prominent in St. Teresa or the fragile sense of self that made Angela of Foligno need to know she was 'loved more than any other woman in the valley of Spoleto' before she could proceed with confidence. Julian seems to be secure in herself. What she needed was the opportunity to pray,

to write, and in so doing digest and analyse what had been given to her in trust for others.

Possibly Julian knew that formal religious life would not work for her. Nothing in her book indicates a previous monastic training. At her death bed it is her mother not her Reverend Mother who is in evidence, and there is none of the usual religious terminology or bridal mysticism so prevalent among nuns. Also, in a convent Julian would not have been able to give her time so exclusively either to God or to ordinary people. Her life would be dominated by a strict horarium arranged around the Divine Office and community duties. Contact with lay people would be at the discretion of the Superior.

In an anchorhold Julian was free to arrange her day with a certain fluidity. She could make people who visited her welcome or not as she herself chose. And being in the middle of a city she was accessible to anyone who wished to approach her.

[15] **Julian's personal call to generativity**

Carl Rogers discovered in his therapeutic practice that when people shared their deepest experiences what they thought to be most personal was actually most universal. So often I have heard in a group that has been meeting at Aylesford to study Julian's writings: "That's what I have always felt about God". "That really rings true with me but I've never heard it in Church": "Julian has really hit that on the head. She's saying what I have thought deep down."

Julian herself must have grown in insightfulness through her contact with people as counsellor and befriender when they came to speak

to her in times of trouble and crisis. As she listened she must have realised that she could trust her growing insights into the meaning of her Revelations, trust herself, trust God. This is evident in that in the *Short Text*, supposedly written shortly after the Shewings, Julian often mentions that she submits to the Church, or that she only wants to see pictures approved by the authorities, that people should listen to the teaching of their priest and so forth. These remarks are noticeably fewer in the longer version. Twenty years later Julian, while obviously in communion with the Church and adhering to orthodox teaching, is far more sure of her ground. She acknowledged that there may be other ways of looking at things but is confident enough to say this or that is so 'as I see it'. She can hold in tension various opinions and opposing doctrines. Maybe her experience as a counsellor led her to remark on such mysteries as God giving to each one some defect that allows them to be blamed in this world but which does not block God's love or offend God. We had to wait for Thérèse of Lisieux in the last century to say more or less the same thing once again.

Julian is an expert in the human person. Anchorhold life offered her the opportunity to ponder, to pray and to know other human persons at depths. All of this is evident in her book. In returning to the same themes over and over again in her writings Julian penetrates them ever more deeply. She does not have different things to say so much as being like the householder Jesus speaks of in the gospels, drawing new and old from the same store of treasure. We may even one day discover another version that Julian wrote ten years after the version we have, and in it no doubt we would find the same themes worked over at even greater depths and with new insights into their significance.

[16] **Metaphors**

It is axiomatic that as they grow more mature and accept the fact of aging and progressive diminishment, ready to 'decrease that Christ may increase', people become far more aware of life's preciousness and giftedness. Maybe it is this that gives Julian's writings such a note of joy and optimism. Life is good. God is everything that is good. God is a friend: courteous, loveable, interested in even the smallest thing as well as the greatest.

Julian seems to return to where she had begun and 'know the place for the first time' to echo T.S. Eliot again. God is not 'out there' in some esoteric sphere. Nor is he with the 'perfect' and the 'sinless'. God is with us as we are. God is here. God is now. God is in the things pertaining to daily life: mothering, feeding, birthing, clothing. God is a knitter, busily integrating our component parts into one whole. God is homely (with all the overtones the word 'home' has in the English language that cannot be translated into another tongue in such a way that the nuances are preserved).

Julian describes spiritual realities through metaphors that reflect the ordinary: a cloth in the wind, a child learning to walk, raindrops falling from the eaves, herring scales, a mother's love, a friend's service, a lord and his servant. Many of these idioms belong only to the Long Text, and one feels that Julian may well have searched them out in order to help those who came to see her. She tells people that God is near rather than far away. God is present in all if only we have eyes to see. And to see we have only to look.

From the long days of no further visions or revelations Julian can counsel on persevering in prayer through the dark times. Nor does she evade the hard questions relating to sin and redemption, grace

and mercy, our body and our soul. Because of her transitional near-death experience she helps to create one of the many new stories that conversion facilitates. Her early dedicated life, her sins, her mistakes, her youthful enthusiasm, give way to a mature vision and an enlarged perspective. In similar fashion the Church is itself the repository of a multitude of life-stories that tell of God's grace and the offer of newness after the little deaths and transitions we all must live through in our development as human beings formed in God's likeness.

[17] In this area it is worth noting too that, unlike many fourteenth century depictions of Mary, Julian does not exalt her as intercessor between a sinful humanity and a wrathful God. Mary the tender and merciful mother is not contrasted with the avenging Father who exacts the blood of his Son for our redemption. Instead the traits of the loving woman are accorded to Christ himself. Mary is most definitely on our side of the divide: deeply loved, prayerful, humble, able to be used in God's plan, a seeker after truth and wisdom because she too keeps her gaze, her "beholding", on God rather than self as we are called to do.

Our Response

So what has all this to say to us today? Well, one obvious reflection is that Julian's writings have come to light at a time when ordinary people are growing to trust their particular insights and articulate them. Julian is our model in that she seems able to integrate her own experience with the traditional roots of orthodox Christian belief. She is very aware of being one member of the Church and therefore only

holding a few pieces of the full picture. But what she can share she will share generously, without expecting to know all the answers.

We need to be more confident in our own sense of God and in our own developmental processes. We must know how to return to certain key points of our lives and draw out their inner meaning, rather than be always seeking for something new and different.

Also we could ask ourselves: are we ready to recognise and grow through our own particular transitions with all their muddled and unanswered questions? Do we know what we really want and have we the boldness to ask for it perseveringly 'in sure trust'?

The more we know God and ourselves the more we will have compassion on ourselves and others. Grace and mercy are at the heart of life. Whatever our mistakes or our sins, a new start is always possible. God is the God of the second chance. I quote here from Eva Heyman, interviewed in the book *Unveiled - Nuns Talking*. Eva speaks of her work with those whom society ^[18]often rejects, and with whom we too must identify if we want to be made whole, saying:

So now, when I deal with so many people who have to face that kind of brokenness (Rejection/relationships ending/AIDS etc.) to have been there myself has become very important; to be able to own the broken bits of myself and to know that in time they will be healed. I'm going to meet that kind of brokenness if I'm going to love Christ who allowed himself to be broken for me; and if I talk about identifying with people then I need to identify with my own brokenness, otherwise it's just arrogance to say I identify with other people's. Brokenness

is part of our humanity whether we are nuns or not nuns...

For me the God of the second chance has become so important in my own life that not to recognise that in the lives of other people makes no sense. After all, I think that is the way our Lord dealt with people... I believe that the most important thing about Christ was his compassion. He understood the complexity of our broken human relationships and is, above all, the God who forgives not only once, but as often as needed. He is not a judging God.³

Julian too knew the God of the second chance. She actually had a death-bed sacramental anointing in order to return cleansed and renewed, ready to face the rest of her life with confidence and trust. God had proved to be merciful to her and she spent her remaining days drawing out all that she had learned subconsciously in those compacted few hours.

Each one of us is called to at least some degree of solitude, some degree of aloneness with God within our own specific vocation. We all have to embrace in our faith journey some elements at least of the anchoritic calling: a willingness to be marginal, to be without power, to be connected to others by bonds that are enduring and mysterious.

As we meditate on our own times of transition we have to draw out their meaning, never being afraid to ask the big questions, because as Rogers says, truth can never be harmful, and every bit of evidence we acquire which leads us closer to the truth should be welcomed rather than feared.

[19] Julian can also teach us the basic virtue of trust. We are accepted. We are held and supported. We are loved. What more can we be lacking if God offers these things to us to make up for what we may or may not have received as children? That of course should never minimise our responsibility to give others love, acceptance, care, tenderness, for in the usual way we receive these through people about us who reflect to us the being of the God we do not know directly.

If we are attentive to our life-experience, patterns will begin to emerge, as they did for Julian, and we will come to see life as a whole rather than in unconnected parts. When this happens we need to be creatively faithful to our insights and follow them through even at cost. If we do not accept these challenges our growth terminates.

So I return to the insights that accompany maturity and the transitions that take us there: intimacy, generativity, and integrity: how to be with others, how to be fruitful, how to be true to ourselves in our own particular vocation. We too are stewards of the gifts of God. We can learn from Julian and from others, but ultimately we must find and celebrate our own way, which is also most personal and most universal, linked as it is with the lives of other Christians and indeed all humanity.

Julian was a steward of the mysteries entrusted to her. To that end she laboured over her writings. She made herself available as friend and counsellor. She thought and prayed and lived in such a way as she felt was consonant with the grace given.

But why did she not then ensure that her writings were known and disseminated during her lifetime? One reason obviously is that she was a woman and therefore not considered competent to teach. She

was not a visionary in the usual sense, nor was she a member of a religious Order that might have venerated her person and preserved her writings.

As she said herself, what she had 'seen' was not so important, and certainly no proof of her sanctity. She was no better than the next person when it came down to brass tacks. Her teaching was integrated into the help she gave to those who came to seek her out as a wise woman, anchored in God; one who knew how to listen and respect the story of each one.

[20] At the end of her reflections that conclude the Long Text, and after all Julian had thought and prayed and studied over the years, there was only one conclusion: *Love*. God is love. God had shown her the Revelations out of love and for love. There wasn't really anything else to say. And to corroborate that truth her readers have only to look, not at Julian, but at the crucified and risen Jesus of the gospels.

There we will discover Jesus for ourselves, and that is where Julian would want us to find him.

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