The Julian Lecture 2003

‘A Room of Her Own’: Julian, Prayer and Creativity

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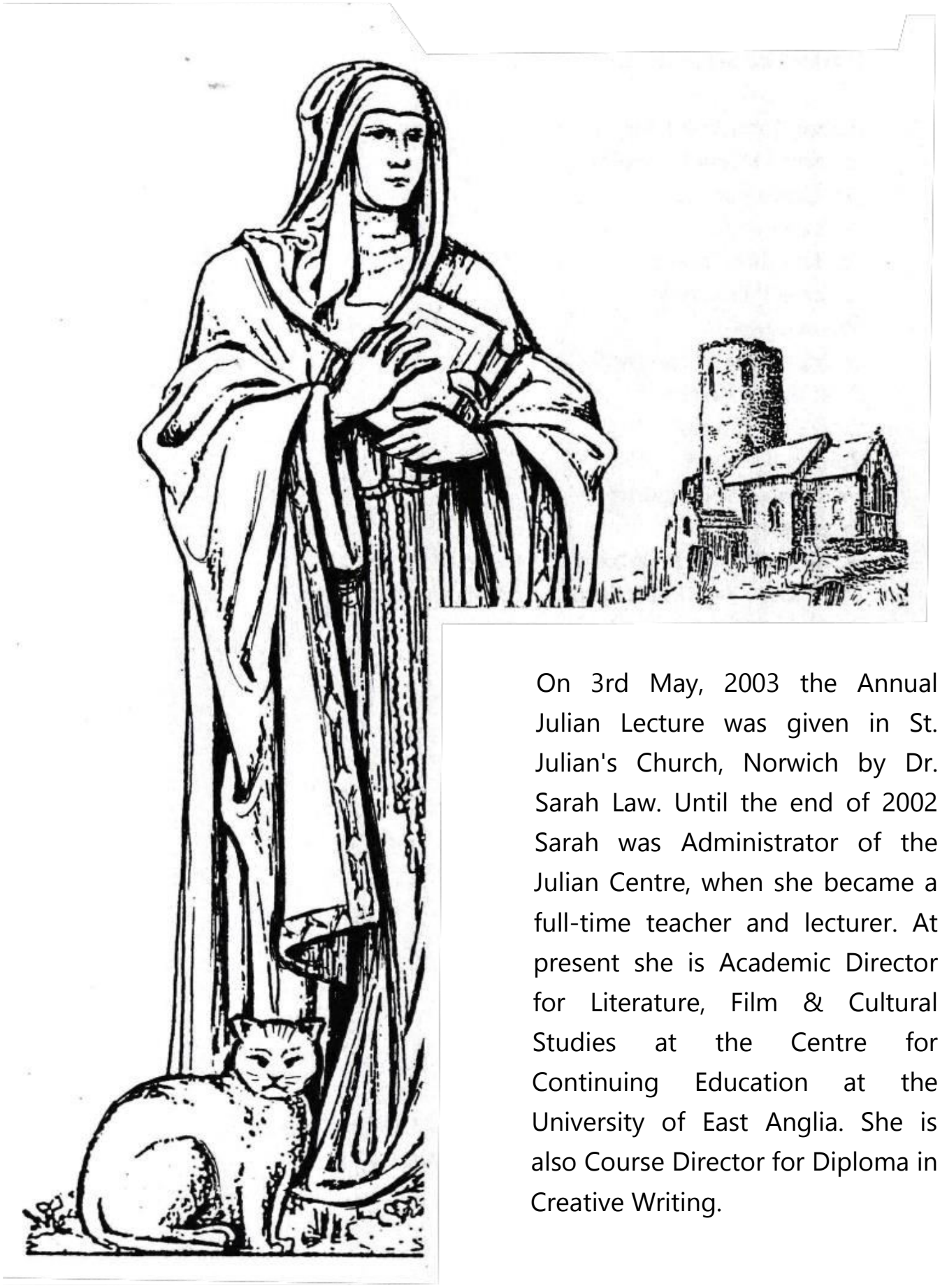

On 3rd May, 2003 the Annual Julian Lecture was given in St. Julian's Church, Norwich by Dr. Sarah Law. Until the end of 2002 Sarah was Administrator of the Julian Centre, when she became a full-time teacher and lecturer. At present she is Academic Director for Literature, Film & Cultural Studies at the Centre for Continuing Education at the University of East Anglia. She is also Course Director for Diploma in Creative Writing.

[1] ***'A Room of Her Own'*: Julian, Prayer and Creativity**

Introduction

It is a delight and a pleasure to be speaking to you this afternoon. As you may know, I was the Julian Centre administrator here for two years, leaving earlier this year in order to develop and teach courses in literature and creative writing at the University of East Anglia, with the Centre for Continuing Education. Although that may seem quite a career leap, I feel strongly that there are connections. This may partly be explained by my abiding interest in the way people have spoken and written about mysticism; for my postgraduate thesis I researched the way some early twentieth century women writers had approached mysticism and spirituality in the imaginative world of fiction writing. But in a wider sense I think it is very important for people to explore their own 'inner vision', and how this might be expressed and communicated in language. The fact that this is a challenging and elusive task makes it all the more compelling! Because I believe that, 'religious' or not, finding new insights into our human condition is vital, particularly at a time when we are so bombarded by media images and social pressures that it is hard, sometimes, to know whether we have a voice or a vision at all. It is my experience that many people have a longing to express themselves creatively, and to explore others' creativity, and that this longing is part of a larger need to know one's authentic place or path in the world.

In Julian's remarkable account of her Revelations I find much that echoes and engages with this longing. Indeed, Julian is an astonishing pioneer: the first woman, as far as we know, to have written a book in English at all. Just how was it that she was able to explore her astonishing 'showings' with such depth and resonance?

The details she relates and dwells on add to the multi-layered mystery of God's love, and the response she gives to this mystery is warm-hearted and compassionate, encouraging her potential readers, her even-Christians of years to come. I hope to explore some aspects of Julian the writer in this lecture; in particular, her [2]situation as a medieval anchoress, and her use of language and imagery as she articulates her encounter with the Divine.

First, though, I would like to fast forward us five and a half centuries, and introduce you to the thoughts of another very significant writer.

A Room of One's Own

In 1928, Virginia Woolf gave an address to two women's colleges at Cambridge. The subsequently published paper was entitled 'A Room of One's Own' and looked at the difficulties facing women who wished to engage with scholarship and writing. The conclusion which Woolf reached, privileged woman though she was herself, was that it is very hard for women to find the time, space and security to write. She felt strongly that there had been an inequality of opportunities which left women at a disadvantage. Of course, women had been writers in previous centuries, and Woolf honours their memories. Nevertheless she feels that the very forms of writing, even of language and sentence structure, were more man-made than woman-friendly, and that a woman who wrote would either rail against these strictures, or unavoidably mimic them. What would a woman's writing be like, wonders Woolf, if these skewed conditions were ameliorated? Her answer is both practical and prophetic. The sum of her practical answer is that 'a woman must have money and a room of her own'; she must have freedom from pressing financial

worries, and she must have a space of her own, set aside for thinking and writing. Woolf's other thoughts are also worth taking into consideration. One concerns the shape of writing. She feels that a woman who writes will find 'some new vehicle, not necessarily in verse, for the poetry in her' (1992: 101), and that 'the book has somehow to be adapted to the body' (ibid). Another intriguing passage considers the content of such writing, and Woolf describes an imaginary woman novelist who paid little attention to conventional plot structure and resolution, but instead 'had a sensibility that was very wide, eager and free. It responded to an [3]almost imperceptible touch on it... It... ranged, too, very subtly and curiously, amongst almost unknown or unrecorded things and showed that perhaps they were not small after all. It brought buried things to light and made one wonder what need there had been to bury them' (1992: 121).

This is powerful thinking. Woolf is envisaging a new emergence of writing and the imagination, a new connection both to physicality and to the resonance of daily life. She suggests that the woman who writes will have new and important things to say to us all. These days, of course, there are no such impediments to the woman writer - so I will certainly not take Woolf's paper as a political manifesto for today. I do however find her ideas interesting in their own right and perceptive as to what has been under-explored in literary history. But let us return to the first woman to write a book in English, and see what she accomplished. I will begin by looking at Julian's situation as a fourteenth century anchoress, and what this meant to her.

An Anchorhold of One's Own

Whether other anchoresses wrote of their lives of prayer is unknown to us, but fourteenth-century Julian was living at a time when writing about spirituality and mysticism in the vernacular was just becoming possible. Turbulent times, with recurring waves of plague and political unrest, combined with an increasing emotional emphasis on the suffering of Christ during His passion. These conditions led to a strong lay piety and demand for spiritual literature. Mystics such as Richard Rolle and the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* wrote, in their very different ways, of the contemplative life as infused with love and longing. Experiencing visions was not considered as outlandish as it would be today, although neither were they considered the hallmark of genuine mysticism. But while Rolle, the *Cloud* author, and Walter Hilton left popular writings, their manuscripts widely distributed, Julian's book seems to have been very little known. Through decades of upheaval and distress, Julian dwelt, hidden in the centre of an important and richly religious city. To a great extent, her [4]anchorhold kept her both hidden and safe. And it enabled her to contemplate and formulate her Revelations.

I am not suggesting that Julian became an anchoress in order to write a book (imagine the reaction of the Bishop if this was her reason!). Although Julian clearly had a religious sensibility from an early age hence her desire to suffer an illness and witness to Christ's passion the showings she experienced were in all probability the most overwhelming episode of her life, an experience which she needed to pray about for decades to come. The anchoritic vocation would have given her the space she needed to do this. The solitary life of prayer and contemplation was not an uncommon one in medieval England: in Norwich there were up to thirty 'anchors', each living alone in a room or rooms attached to the side of a church.

Their whole life was one of enclosure and prayer. But far from being regarded as an oddity, the anchorite or anchoress was much prized by their local community. Many, including Julian, were supported by the wills of local people: this gave her the freedom from financial need which echoes Woolf's suggestion that the woman who wanted to write must not be constrained by financial distractions. Some of these medieval wills are still extant, informing us that Julian lived on until at least her seventies. As Hugh White, in his introduction to the 13th-century *Ancrene Riwle* puts it: We might prefer to regard anchorites as eccentrics, given their way of life asks a set of rather awkward questions of our own, but for many medieval people as the extensive sponsorship of anchorites makes clear the extremity of the anchoritic life was the extremity not of a margin but of a peak' (1993: ix). What lessons can we learn from this 'peak' experience today?

Apart from the obvious advantages of having a place of quiet and stability, the 'room' of the anchorhold had, conventionally, three windows. The first looked into the church and was the spiritual focus of the anchoress's life. There she could watch the priest say prayers and celebrate the Mass, she could receive Holy Communion [5]and say her confession. The second window opened onto the quarters of a servant, who would help the anchoress with practical tasks such as the laundry and the cooking. The third window looked out onto the street, and from this window the anchoress would offer words of wisdom and counsel to all who came in distress.

The more I reflect on this physical structure of the anchorhold, the more clearly these three windows come to symbolise the three areas of our lives where we forge connections, and which inform the quality of our 'interior' experience. The first window is the spiritual connection in the form of worship and membership of a larger community. It is one which many people find difficult to

acknowledge today, but was of vital importance to Julian, who was no doubt sustained by the regular and consistent tenor of liturgical worship; its rich cadences informing the rhythm of her thought. I would suggest that we need to give this window due consideration, particularly if we are intent on giving life some sense of meaning and purpose. Today our choices of spiritual connection are infinitely more varied than Julian could have imagined. But this window, once opened, is full of its own light, precious within the entire anchorhold.

The second window may be one which is easier to relate to today: it symbolises the practical needs of daily living, without which, mystic or not, we would all come unstuck. Of course, we are unlikely today to have a servant to see to such physical and practical needs as did Julian. We need to attend to food, clothing, and other daily needs ourselves. We neglect them at our peril: even the *Ancrene Riwle* emphasised the need for common sense regarding the necessities of life. I am sure that Julian's life was the longer and her psyche was the stronger because of her balanced approach to the matters of everyday living, symbolised by this second anchorhold window. Unlike many of the continental women mystics, Julian's Revelations indicate no masochistic or otherwise extreme attitude to her body: not for her the obsessive anorexia which probably caused the death of her contemporary Catherine of Sienna, nor the [6]extravagant gestures of self-loathing such as Angela of Foligno's drinking of leper water. If we remember to see the anchorhold as a central rather than a marginal expression of existence, the stabilising impact of this second window has significance for the spiritual life of us all.

But there was a third window to Julian's anchorhold too; and this was the one through which she became best known in her lifetime. Through listening compassionately to the stories of her even-Christians and offering her own perspective on their troubles, Julian

was not only learning about the various needs and qualities of those around her, but also sharing her own insights into the compassionate nature of God. Julian never details any specific visitor's troubles, although we know from Margery Kempe's account of her own visit to Julian, that she was a patient and empathic woman. Her Revelations contain the distillation of years of encounter not only of Divine, but also of human nature. So although she was withdrawn from life in the world (the word anchorite actually stems from the Greek for 'I withdraw'), Julian the anchoress was not cut off from other people: she was still part of the community where she dwelt. This is the wise, and the only sane way of contemplating solitude - you are not turning your back on other people, but seeking to be able to relate to them on a more profound level, both in prayer and in words.

For these reasons, then, I suggest that while Virginia Woolf was right to suggest that a room of one's own is a necessity for a woman or a man to gather their thoughts and begin to articulate them, but that an anchorhold of one's own (on a symbolic or internalised level) is even better.

Spirituality and Creativity

But how does Julian express herself in the Revelations? Are Woolf's thoughts about the nature of writing differently, writing outside the traditional literary lineage of any interest when [7]approaching Julian's way? First of all, it is worth considering the connection between spirituality and creativity; between prayer and vision. Woolf was considering primarily the woman writer who wished to explore her imagination in language. But I do not think it is a disservice to Julian's book if we regard it as a 'creative' reflection on what was to

her an overwhelmingly real experience. She was a creative artist as well as a mystic. The two vocations are linked together. Prayer and meditation can open us to states of consciousness which are receptive to spirituality and to creative inspiration. In 1902, psychologist William James described this state as the 'subliminal realm', a part of the psyche that is sensitive to imagery and receptive to grace. Today we might use the idea of left brain/right brain thinking: a recent book on Julian (Hide, 2002) describes her as very much a right-brain person; somebody who processes and makes sense of their experiences creatively and intuitively. And this puts us in touch with something larger than ourselves, however we wish to describe it. As priest and Jungian therapist Morton Kelsey puts it:

Each of us becomes the artist as we allow ourselves to be open to the reality of the Other and give expression to that encounter either in words or paint or stone or in the fabric of our lives. Each of us who has come to know and relate to the Other and expresses this in any way is an artist in spite of himself/herself. (1977: 27)

This is a liberating proposal, and one with which I think Julian would agree, especially if we think of creativity as embedded in the 'fabric of our lives', and not just in the structure of a book. Kelsey also attaches great importance to the images that might arise during a period of prayer or meditation, rather as one would with dreams. This may be a very fruitful way of looking at prayer and creativity. But it is not necessarily everyone's way. We can certainly not assume that Julian experienced vivid images in her regular hours of prayer. In fact she writes rather of the experience of apparently unrewarding prayer, saying it is important to persevere, and that such prayer, although we cannot feel anything, is pleasing to God.

[8]But most importantly, she writes of God as the 'ground of our beseeching'; God as the creative foundation of our contemplation; we are joined to God in a profound way which enables us to be both safe and infinitely enriched. As Hildegard of Bingen wrote three hundred years previously, God is a source of greening (her word for it was 'viriditas') and flourishing, like the bubbling source of a mountain spring. And for Julian, having God as the source of her living and her prayer has opened her to the possibility of God communicating to her through vision, voice, or inner understanding. It does not mean taking flights of fancy in her imagination so much as seeing the resonance in life's daily details, and in our sensory world, and seeing their resonance in the showings themselves.

I have been impressed, in this context, at just how apt Woolf's insights are. In particular, Julian describes in wonder how the smallest and most insignificant things in life are in fact not small at all', and can express most tenderly the fact that God cherishes us all. In chapter five of the Long Text she describes how she sees a 'little thing, the size of a hazelnut', placed in the palm of her hand. Julian wonders about its significance and is told that it is 'all that is', and, despite its inherent fragility, it lasts and ever shall, because God loves it'. The hazelnut is enclosed and sustained by God's love just as surely as is Julian in her anchorhold. But the image is also 'wide, eager and free', it echoes on a cosmic scale, reminding us today of the earth itself, held vulnerably and marvellously in space by the workings of the universe.

Enclosure, Maternity and Natality

This image is one with the prevailing theme of Julian's book: that of being enclosed; nurtured, and sustained by Divinity that both surrounds and enfolds us and is also contained within us. Enclosure and interiority are essential concepts in Julian's perception of our relationship to the Divine. Is this because she is an anchoress, herself enclosed in a life of prayer, or is it because she is a woman? This is an impossible question to answer, of course, but it does seem [9]to be the case that while many male mystics have sought to categorise mystical experience on a graded journey, a 'scale' or 'ladder' of perfection (Hilton), or even an 'ascent' as John of the Cross puts it, women mystics are less likely to be concerned with progressive stages of the mystical path and more likely to explore images of interiority and centeredness. Hildegard of Bingen saw the universe as what she describes as a 'cosmic egg', sustained by the four winds and containing all of life. Teresa of Avila, the Counter Reformation mystic, described the soul journeying not up a ladder or a mountain, but inwards, into the centre of an 'Interior Castle' where the Godhead dwells. Other women mystics refer directly to maternity as an expression of devotion: Hadewijch of Brabant and Brigit of Sweden experience mystical pregnancies, feeling within themselves the Holy Spirit in embodied form. How does Julian express her experience of being enclosed in God and of God being enclosed in us?

Julian certainly does not ignore the body she sees Christ in his incarnation has sanctified the 'sensuality' as well as the divine 'substance' of our human condition. She also imagines that Heaven will employ all of our five senses, as we shall not only see God there, but also be 'feeling him fully, hearing him spiritually, smelling him delectably and swallowing him sweetly' (*Long Text* chapter 43, 104). Even in this life 'we are enfolded in love', Julian says. 'For as the body

is clad in the cloth, and the flesh in the skin, and the bones in the chest, and the heart in the chest, so are we, soul and body, clad in the goodness of God and enclosed in it' (*Long Text* chapter 6, 49). Julian sees the body is to be cherished, held as it is in tender regard by God. And the image of maternity is central to her understanding of the divine. But Julian sees the qualities of bringing to birth and mothering as attributable to Divinity itself, particularly in the person of Christ. And in this image is concentrated the most moving, and the most original of Julian's insights. It combines her abiding sense of being enclosed in and nurtured by God together with an understanding of how we are given the space to grow and respond.

[10]Julian's exploration of the 'motherhood' of God is not a complete innovation: there are Biblical passages which indicate the motherly aspects of God; and earlier writers such as St Anselm who identify Christ with a mother. But Julian draws out the full implications of God's motherhood in a way that is both realistic and resonant, truly, in Woolf's words, an act of bringing 'buried things to light' and making one 'wonder what need there had been to bury them'.

While the somewhat misogynist St Jerome considered a pregnant woman to be a decidedly unedifying sight, and even St Augustine declared that 'a mother shall hold a lesser place in heaven' (quoted in Heimmel, 1982: 72), for Julian, mother is 'a fair, lovely word', and 'to the nature of motherhood belong tender love, wisdom, and knowledge, and it is good'. (*Long Text* chapter 60, 142). It is so much an embodiment of good that it serves us as an image of Divinity: 'Thus Jesus Christ who does good for evil is our true mother; we have our being from him where the ground of motherhood begins, with all the sweet protection of love which follows eternally. God is our mother as truly as he is our father' (*Long Text* chapter 59, 139). Like a mother who breastfeeds her child, Christ nourishes us with the

sacrament, like a mother, he allows us sometimes to stray and fall in order to grow. Indeed we have a multiplicity of mothers, as Julian also considers Mary's motherhood as one that embraces us all: 'Thus our Lady is our mother in whom we are all enclosed, and we are born from her in Christ; for she who is mother of our Saviour is mother of all who will be saved in our Saviour. And our Saviour is our true mother in whom we are eternally born and by whom we shall always be enclosed. This was shown abundantly, fully and sweetly' (*Long Text* chapter 57, 136). 'We think back through our mothers' suggests Woolf in her paper, as she contemplates the unacknowledged woman writer's heritage. Five and a half centuries previously, Julian had imagined the concept of maternal heritage as a glorious thing indeed.

We do not know whether Julian experienced motherhood herself. It had been thought previously that she had been a Benedictine nun before embarking on her life as a solitary, and that her tender [11]understanding of a mother's role stemmed from memories of her own childhood. We can certainly presume that Julian was close to her mother as she tells us that she was present at her sickbed in 1373. More recent scholarship has tended to think that Julian was not in fact a nun, but may well have been married herself, possibly losing husband and children in one of the cruel waves of plague. This, it has been suggested, would explain Julian's acceptance that our earthly mothers can only bear us into a fragile, uncertain existence. And indeed there is no denial of the loss and suffering of the human condition, as we shall presently see.

But Julian does not choose to tell us of these circumstances of her own particular life. And this, together with the fact that she does not apply images of supernatural pregnancy to herself, has the effect of aligning Julian with all of us as a soul born of God rather than

separating us by gender, age, religious or lay, parental or non-parental status. We are all born into this world and by this fact alone we are loved by God and therefore should cherish ourselves and each other, without exception.

This perspective is a refreshing one which has an echo in contemporary theology. Grace Jantzen, in her recent book 'Becoming Divine' suggests that we explore the image of 'natality', emphasising our common status as 'natals' - beings born anew into the world and our life now as both precious and divine. She suggests that this is vital in refocusing philosophies of religion towards situations of present need and growth. And, importantly, as natals, Jantzen reminds us, we have the inherent capacity for 'new beginnings' at every stage of our lives; which is just what Julian, experiencing God as always longing for us to turn from our mistakes and start anew, would agree with. And those new beginnings, since our nature is 'oned' with that of the Creator, are necessarily creative and precious in themselves.

An Abundance of Mystery

You will have noticed that Julian's language when she speaks of being endlessly born and endlessly enclosed in God is far from straightforward. And it is true that her use of language is often [12]apparently contradictory or illogical. She is certainly not a feminist in the sense of using inclusive language before such a concept came into being: but rather, she mixes her pronouns and her images for God with a joyful illogicality:

And so I saw that God rejoices that he is our father, and God

> *rejoices that he is our mother, and God rejoices that he is our true spouse, and our soul is his much-loved bride.* (*Long Text* chapter 52, 125)

It is as if the bonds of language cannot hold the abundance Julian has experienced, and what she conveys is driven by joy rather than grammar. In doing this, she is, explains Denys Turner in his book *The Darkness of God*, using the 'apophatic method' of speaking about mysticism by encouraging us to let go of our preconceived notions and instead experience God as a mystery and a love that exceeds our comprehension. This way of writing is a way of 'showing by means of language that which lies beyond language' (1995: 34) comments Turner. Julian does this by what he calls a 'superfluity of affirmation'. If this sounds rather frightening, Julian herself explains that 'we cannot profit from reason alone, unless we also have perception and love'; and it is love, and the perception of love despite our limitations, that is her deepest concern. If this involves us trying to see beyond our limitations, so much the better.

Julian's text is not all dizzying affirmation. But there is always a generous, open-ended quality to her writing, even when she is telling a story. The most obvious part of the Revelations that does this is the tale of the Lord and Servant, which occurs only in the *Long Text*. At first glance this parable seems clearer than much of the surrounding chapters: it tells of a Lord who sends a servant on an errand (to grow vegetables in his garden), but the servant, falling into a ditch, is desolate and alone, unaware that the Lord is looking on him compassionately. Julian is told to consider the vision carefully, and gradually draws more insight from details and observations. Again, it is the small details - the torn tunic of the servant, the blue robe of the Lord, which add both to the compelling tone of the story and to the level of allegorical interpretation. She realises that what we

perceive as grievous falling is not regarded as [13]such by God. She also reads parallel scriptural events into it: the servant is 'Adam and everyman', falling into sin, but he is also Christ, falling into the Virgin's womb and taking on our humanity. The meanings are enfolded one within the other just as our substance is enclosed within God's and God is enclosed within us. This 'parable' episode certainly does not 'solve the problem of pain and suffering, but perhaps comes closest to explaining the puzzle of sin which Julian wonders over throughout the Revelations. It is a poetic resolution rather than a logical one.

For all her joy at being enfolded in a Divinity who both nourishes and nurtures, Julian is no naïve child regarding the concerns of the world. It is a perennial concern of the writer how to acknowledge pain and loss while celebrating his or her creative vision; whether it is ethical to question the 'feeling that song constituted a betrayal of suffering' (as Seamus Heaney puts it in his essay 'The Government of the Tongue'). The same problem occurs in spirituality - perhaps magnified. Loss and suffering somehow have to be incorporated into faith, without draining that faith of its hope and affirmation. Not everyone can manage this difficult negotiation, as William James wrote in his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. James distinguished between those he termed 'once- born'; religious people who are so overly optimistic that they fail even to acknowledge the physical and spiritual trials of life, and the 'twice-born', who have possibly already undergone a traumatic loss or crisis, and seek to find a spirituality which acknowledges the difficult aspects of life and works with them towards a more balanced faith. 'The completest religions would therefore seem to be those in which the pessimistic elements are best developed...man must die to an unreal life before he can be born into the real life' (1902: 162). James considers this a prerequisite to mystical experience. He also

comments that, in his opinion, it is women who tend to be 'once-born' and men who grapple with the profundities of religion. Julian, as you might expect, confounds this assumption.

[14]All of Julian's profound acknowledgement of sin and suffering, however, is focused on the passion of Christ. Whatever losses she has suffered in her own life are connected with and absorbed by the pains of the crucifixion, which she describes in graphic detail at the beginning of the Revelations. 'Suddenly', she says:

> *I saw the red blood trickling down from under the crown of thorns, hot and fresh and very plentiful, as though it was the moment of his passion when the crown of thorns was thrust onto his blessed head, he who was both God and man, the same who suffered for me like that.*

It took courage to write these experiences with Julian's honesty, and it takes courage to read them too. Julian does not spare us the effects of bitter winds and dehydration upon the crucified Saviour. But her writing also moves us with her individual touches, drawn from her daily life: blood running from the crown of thorns like 'rain from the eaves' of a medieval house; Christ buffeted by the wind is 'hung in the air, as a cloth is hung to dry'; later using this image for all of us when we face trials: 'man's life will be shaken and troubled as a cloth is shaken in the breeze'.

Julian's homely language does not diminish the portrait of Christ's suffering or ours, but instead imbues it with poignancy-mystery resides within the ordinary - and makes us see it afresh. Her picture of his suffering is total: many passages of Julian's text can - and do - inform Lenten devotions or Stations of the Cross. And Julian's writings used in this way can be a useful corrective for those extracts

which pigeon hole her as a writer who has much to say about comfort and reassurance but little of theological depth. A fuller reading of Julian will show just how much she struggled with concepts of sin and evil, and questioned how, as she is reassured, 'all shall be well' when evil is in the world and we cannot stop from falling at times into sin and despondency. And while there is no response that can remove the mystery of God's reassurance, Julian expresses the possibility of hope in the face of despair by more startling shifts in perspective: reinforcing the mystery rather than resolving it. Christ in his passion suddenly changes his expression to one of joy. The wound in his suffering body becomes a 'sweet open side' where he wishes us to seek refuge (an image of embrace and enclosure again).

The parable of [15]the Lord and the Servant is open-ended and multi-layered in meaning. We are told more than once that God's perspective is greater and more generous than ours, for in the sight of heaven 'we do not fall', and even that 'our wounds become honours'. We have to be prepared to let go of our reason and our logic, and be prepared for the unexpected; to be 'surprised by joy' as CS Lewis puts it, in the midst of distress. For 'we know that he will appear suddenly and joyfully to all those that love him', Julian affirms (chapter 10).

Open-handed Enclosure

Not that this joy can be commanded to order. Julian knows that we are enfolded in love, but even she is subject to moods of dryness and depression. At one point in the *Revelations* she admits that ‘this place is prison, this life is penance [though she believes that Christ is

the remedy to this concept of punishment]'. And this concept addresses the converse of the loving image of enclosure which so informs Julian's understanding of her showings. For of course, it is possible to feel that enclosure clashes with freedom; that the anchorhold resembles a claustrophobic prison cell, that we are trapped in the circumstances of our lives without recourse to an appeal. But I think that Julian has in the text of her Revelations the antidote to this 'closed' thinking. When she saw the 'little thing, the size of a hazelnut' in the palm of her hand, after all, it was not hidden in a clenched fist, but offered tenderly for her consideration. And Julian finds that God invites a human response of wonder, questioning and striving, despite all the pitfalls and frailties. It is what is expected of us. 'It pleases God a great deal if the soul never ceases to search... seeking is as good as finding for the time that our soul is allowed to labour' (*Long Text* chapter10, 57). And of course, this was her purpose in entering the anchorhold; to seek for God and to find a way of assimilating and expressing all that she has experienced.

This attitude of seeking and beholding is what distinguishes the praying soul from a passive prisoner. 'And all who are under heaven and will come there, their way is by longing and wishing' (*Long Text* chapter 51, 122). There is a dynamic bond between God and the soul [16]which is well-reflected by the bond between mother and child, with all the closeness together with growth and freedom which this implies. Melanie Klein, the twentieth-century psychoanalyst who looked particularly closely at bond between mother and child, notes that in good parenting the 'holding' of the child by the mother brings the assurance of boundaries which protect but still allow for the freedom of exploration. This seems to be the concept which most closely resembles Julian's pervasive imagery of enclosure.

I would like to link this concept of seeking and trusting with my thoughts on the importance of imaginative prayer and the creative use of language, especially when considering Julian's imagery and language in the *Revelations*. Julian on occasions does seem to be challenging the orthodox beliefs of the church: if not on the motherhood of God, then perhaps on her refusal to say she saw any wrath in God, when she did not - nor did she have any glimpse of hell. Rather, she sees the anger in us rather than in God; she sees no-one beyond God's redemptive love. These are what modern philosopher of religion John Hick called 'Julian's fruitful heresies' which spring directly from her Showings. And they do seem to have been fruitful, anticipating much of modern psychotherapy today. Her imagery, too, is daring and original. Julian is more concerned to convey to us the startling intimacy and delight of her experience of God than to maintain either conventional religious orthodoxy or narrative consistency. And surely a use of imagery which helps us to realise that God is more present, compassionate and tender, but at the same time more mysterious and infinite than human language can capture, is more important, more creatively 'true' than is sticking fearfully to doctrinal truths. Perhaps this is a literary case for St Augustine's precept of 'Love, and do as you will' (Julian has no quarrel with the Church but simply desires to record her knowledge of the Divine), or Simone Weil's more expansive comment that you cannot in fact wander far from Christ in search of truth without falling into his arms again.

[17]Julian in her *Revelations* uses metaphors (more than I have discussed here) in order to build up a conception of the Divine as she has experienced it, and to startle us with unusual connections and shifts of perspectives, and also to hint towards the great mystery of Divinity which is beyond our rational use of language and imagery. If we remember that she was writing in Middle English, without

precedent as a woman (something she is very aware of in the early *Short Text*, where she classifies herself as a 'woman, ignorant, weak and frail') Julian's use of her mother-tongue is even more amazing.

Conclusion: Modern Julian

I cannot think but that Virginia Woolf would be struck indeed by how her ideas in 'A Room of One's Own' were, in a way, anticipated by a devout 'recluse in Norwich'. In fact, I wonder whether Woolf might not have heard of Julian during one of her days researching in the British Museum, or her literary soirees at Bloomsbury. The idea is not so far-fetched as you might suppose: Julian's *Revelations* had become available again in a popular edition edited by Grace Warrack, in 1901, and certainly came to the attention of Evelyn Underhill, who in her work *Mysticism* in 1911, did much to make the mystical tradition in England well-known and esteemed by a twentieth century readership. A renewed interest in articulating the spiritual occurred at a time when writers - particularly women writers - were experimenting with fiction, and they often used creative images to explore what they believed to be mystical experience. Woolf once expressed her own spirituality as 'agnosticism with mystery at the heart of it'. In fact she had her own spiritual influence as a young woman: her aunt, Caroline Stephen, at first regarded as a family eccentric, became a celebrated Quaker, and wrote several books which revived the interest in mystical experience among late nineteenth-century Friends. Virginia Woolf would visit her aunt, who was nicknamed 'Nun', in her house in Cambridge, the house where Caroline Stephen considered herself a 'mother' to many young Quakers and wrote her books *Light* [18] *Arising: Thoughts on the Central Radiance* and *The Vision of Faith*. 'Nun' was thus something

of an anchoress and mystic herself. This is Woolf's biographical portrait of her aunt in the *Guardian* church weekly, 21 April, 1909:

> *One could not be with her without feeling that after suffering and thought she had come to dwell apart, among the 'things which are unseen and eternal' and that it was her perpetual wish to make others share her peace. But she was no solitary mystic. She was one of the few to whom the gift of expression is given together with the need of it, and in addition to a wonderful command of language she had a scrupulous wish to use it accurately. Thus her effect on people is scarcely to be decided, and must have reached many to whom her books are unknown.*

I think that Woolf would have written very similarly of Julian, had she had the opportunity. But whether she did know of her is perhaps of secondary importance to the connections that can be made between spirituality, language and creativity. Given the right conditions of an inner anchorhold - for man or woman and a confidence that 'Love' encourages us to seek and explore, and gives an ultimate meaning to self and others, enriching discoveries can be made. I believe that Julian realised this during her enclosed years of prayer, contemplation, and writing. And I hope that this 'reading' of Julian reinforces the sense both of a hidden heritage and a flourishing future.

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