

The Julian Lecture 2008

Two Women Facing Death

Julian of Norwich and ETTY HILLESUM



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Canon Melvyn Matthews is a prolific writer on spirituality and was until recently Chancellor of the beautiful and historic Wells Cathedral. He has a long-term interest in the meaning and relevance of mysticism to the Church which began when he was a university chaplain. His published works include *Both Alike to Thee*, *The Hidden Word*, *God's Space in You* and *Nearer than Breathing*. In his latest book, *Awake to God-explorations of the Mystical Way*, Canon Matthews attempts to bring together the different themes of self-emptying and participation which postmodern theologians have brought back into the conversation about God. It relates these themes to the Christian tradition and with the insights of some of the great mystics and thinkers of the past - Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich, Thomas Traherne, Ety Hillesum and Paul Celan - in order to suggest a style of being and seeing for the contemporary Christian.

[3] At first sight Julian of Norwich and Ety Hillesum would seem unusual, if not totally incompatible bedfellows. They appear to have very little in common. Julian was a devout pre-reformation Christian while Ety was a post-enlightenment secularised Jew. Julian was an anchoress, following a daily pattern of worship, while as far as we can see Ety had no pattern of worship and only towards the end of her diaries does she find herself forced to kneel. Julian would have been vowed to celibacy, but Ety was a modern woman who classes herself as 'among the better lovers'. Nor could their circumstances have been more different, for Julian lived alone in a medieval English country town, albeit one beginning to experience some economic revival, whereas Ety lived a busy, socially packed life with many friends in modern Amsterdam studying languages and literature. Moreover their outlook on religion was totally different. Julian questioned her received faith in the light of her experience, while Ety, as we shall see, questions her experience in the light of her slowly emerging but totally unstructured faith.

On the other hand there are a number of important similarities between them. Both were single women and it should be said, as we shall see later, that both their womanhood and their singleness were tremendously important factors for each of them. Both of them were literate and educated. Although Julian, as any medieval woman was forced to do, called herself 'a simple creature, unlettered', the evidence of the Showings is that she was familiar with a wide range of medieval theological writing. Both women deliberately kept diaries or wrote personal accounts which were important to them both, Julian even rewriting her account some years later to clarify and enlarge upon what she had said earlier. Both women were ill and knew that their illnesses were important to them as part of their respective spiritual journeys. Both of them faced death within [4] themselves and within the society of which they were a part. In

spite of, or perhaps because of this, both arrived at a position of some internal illumination so that then both of them could speak meaningfully and movingly of the centrality of faith, hope and charity in human life.

So, there are differences and similarities, the most important difference being that of faith and practice, while the crucial similarities concern the questions of womanhood and suffering. All of these are also enormously important issues for the modern mind - namely cross faith understanding, the centrality or not of religious practice, the place of women and singleness in society and the role of the body in self-understanding. We also face death in our world in the most acute fashion. Indeed the fortunes of both women turned on the question of death. So while they may be different from each other they feel tremendously familiar to us now.

What sort of death did they face? Let us look first at the 'death' which ETTY HILLESUM faced in Holland during her lifetime. For her as a Jew, the most horrific feature of life was the sequence of events which comprised the outbreak of war, the invasion and occupation of Holland by Germany and the subsequent persecution and extermination of the Jews both in Holland and across Nazi occupied Europe. This Holocaust was the 'death' that ETTY HILLESUM faced. I think we need to realise that the roots of the Holocaust lie very deep in European history, and that it has a religious dimension. The Early Fathers of the church and the Reformation theologians were all deeply anti-semitic. They engaged in a teaching of contempt for the Jews as those who murdered Christ. John Chrysostom (344-407) says:

Brothel and theatre, the synagogue is also a cave of pirates and a lair of wild beasts.... Living for their belly, the Jews

behave no better than hogs...

While Martin Luther (1483-1546) encouraged his congregations to:

... set fire to their synagogues or schools and bury or cover with dirt whatever will not burn... this is to be done in honour of our Lord and of Christendom.

[5] This was an instruction which came to fulfilment on Kristallnacht 1939 when synagogues were burned throughout Germany.

The arrival of the Age of Enlightenment appeared to offer a way out of the religious bigotry of both catholic and protestant by affirming the centrality of human reason and the inevitability of progress, both of which would become central characteristics of what we now call modernism. But it has also been said that the arrival of the purely secular state simply meant that the old 'teaching of contempt' was freed from religious controls against violence thus unleashing the power of that teaching in society. Others emphasised the rise of science saying that this gave the state the capacity for efficient transport and the destruction of millions of people. Indeed the rise of the secular state was often, particularly in France, said to be the responsibility of the Jews. But whatever the causes - and they are complex - the Holocaust saw something like six million Jews being singled out, deported, used as slave labour and finally destroyed.

There were of course particular facets to the Holocaust in Holland. Holland had been neutral during World War One and for a number of reasons resistance in Holland was slow to form and in many ways more 'spiritual' than, say, the resistance in France. There was a strike of municipal workers in Amsterdam and in 1943, 85% of the student body refused to sign the oath of allegiance to the occupying power.

But meanwhile Rotterdam had been practically destroyed by bombing, Queen Wilhelmina had fled to Britain and of the 140,000 Jews who were in the country in 1940 when the country was invaded 107,000 had been deported by 1945, while about 30,000 survived mainly by fleeing the country. Seventy five per cent perished in the Nazi death camps. A few, like Anne Frank, went into hiding, but others, like Etty Hillesum, who rode her bicycle fearlessly through the streets of Amsterdam while Anne Frank was hiding in her attic, refused to flee. Etty Hillesum had found work with the Jewish Council, the body set up by the occupying power to deal with Jewish questions but found that difficult and was transferred to 'The Department of Social Welfare for People in Transit' at her own request in 1942. This meant she worked in the transit camp at Westerbork where Jewish people awaited transfer to the death camps. She said she 'wished to share her people's fate'. So 'Death' for Etty Hillesum was all around her. It was also within her as she had some acute personal infirmities. Her family also contained ^[6]a degree of suffering as her brother Mischa was very unstable. Then the love of her life, the psycho-chirologist Julius Spier, died of leukaemia. In spite of all this, or perhaps because of it, she wrote:

Suffering is not beneath human dignity. I mean: it is possible to suffer with dignity and without. Most of us in the West don't understand the art of suffering and experience a thousand fears instead. We cease to be alive, being full of fear, bitterness, hatred and despair. I wonder if there is much of a difference between being consumed here by a thousand fears or in Poland by a thousand lice and by hunger? We have to accept death as part of life, even the most horrible of deaths.

My heart is a floodgate for a never-ending tide of misery.

Meanwhile the England of the fourteenth century, the century in which Julian was born, was completely different but still contained within itself a 'death' of almost holocaust proportions. Ostensibly it was a time of enormous religious energy and vitality. This was the time of the building of great gothic churches and cathedrals. In Wells the Chapter House was built, the Quire was extended and the Vicars' Close built to establish the Vicars Choral as a college. Similar developments were happening all over Europe. This was also the time when the English language developed as a language of great sonority and elegance, when Chaucer wrote his Canterbury Tales and, of course, Julian became the first to write a great theological work in the English language.

But it was also the most terrible century, full of death of the most horrible kind. The Plague arrived in England in August 1348, reached London in November and Norwich in January 1349. One third of the population of Norwich died along with fifty per cent of the clergy. Politically the country was putting itself at risk as Edward III quarrelled with France and the Hundred Years' War began. In 1381 we see the Peasants' Revolt with the execution of the Archbishop of Canterbury by the mob in London and the last of the rebels executed in Norwich. All this played itself out against two enormous ecclesiastical struggles, firstly the Great Schism of 1377, with Henry ^[7]Despenser, Bishop of Norwich, leading an army to fight on behalf of the Pope in Rome, a crusade which was defeated, with many from Norwich dying in the process and second, the struggle against Lollardy. The first English Bible, translated by Wycliffe and others, had appeared in 1390 while a group of English Bishops, led by Henry Despenser, requested the death penalty against the Lollards, which was granted. The Lollards' pit where they were burned was not far from Julian's cell.

In and amongst all this death Julian herself desires death:

I desired three graces by the gift of God... the second was bodily sickness... And I wished it to be so severe that it might seem mortal... Whilst I myself should believe that I was dying. In this sickness I wanted to have every kind of pain, bodily and spiritual which I should have if I were dying.

Then I said to those who were with me: Today is my Doomsday. And I said this because I expected to die....

So both women are surrounded and interpenetrated by death. What can we say about this parallel phenomenon? Although separated by so many years and by so much else, these two women exhibit similar responses which focus on the place of the body. Both women, of course, lived through a 'holocaust'. In that holocaust, however different, both women deliberately 'embrace' death. And by death here we mean something more than mere physical death, although that is part of it. They embrace the phenomenon, the theological reality, of death. Moreover, both women identify entirely with the suffering of their people - Ety with the Jewish people, Julian with her 'even christen', and both women exhibit this 'death' in their bodies - Ety by her weakness, Julian by her near death.

Let us pause for a moment over this question of the centrality of the body. We have to recognise that for both Ety and Julian, the response to the holocaust was not simply an intellectual one. They responded to what was happening in the body of society with a bodily response. This was not just a question of what they said but a question of what happened to them as a whole, 'in the body'. They suffered 'in the body' what the body of society was suffering.

[8] Moreover, both of them were acutely aware of the importance of their bodies. Etty is always deeply conscious of her body. She constantly records details about warmth/cold, pain, exhilaration, physical/sexual contact, other peoples' bodies and so on, all of which are deeply important. This is no less the case for Julian, although for her what happens to her body is intimately linked with Christ's body and vice versa. This parallel is interesting for two reasons. The first is that contemporary research into the texts written by medieval women reveals that the period between 1200 and 1500 saw the development of a new attitude towards the body in which physicality came to be seen 'less as a barrier than an opportunity'.

The goal of religious women was thus to realise the opportunity of physicality. They strove not to eradicate body but to merge their own humiliating and painful flesh with that flesh whose agony, espoused by choice was salvation. Luxuriating in Christ's physicality, they found there the lifting up and redemption of their own. (Caroline Bynum Walker)

This can be seen in the writings of other women at this time besides Julian, especially, perhaps, Margery Kempe.

The other reason this phenomenon is interesting is because it chimes in with contemporary interest in the body and physicality. We do not have to look very far to see this obsession blazoned across our culture and I think one of the reasons why Etty is so fascinating for contemporary people, women in particular, is because of her way of thinking through her bodily senses. The question which remains unanswered for us is whether this is really as unhealthy as many have suggested or whether it is really one of the ways in which we must 'think' today and one of the central elements in a wholesome spirituality. Can we really do without our bodies in the approach to

God? Julian and her contemporaries deliberately espoused physicality as a way to share in Christ. Etty found, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, that by 'luxuriating in her body' she was brought closer to what she in the end called 'God'. In other words they come to the same place, but one deliberately, the other by introspection. The unanswered question is whether this is only possible at a time of physical suffering?

[9] I now want to look in closer detail at the two different responses of these two women to the 'deaths' which they embraced. First let us look at Etty Hillesum. I became aware, when giving a similar presentation to this recently in Salisbury, that people are not as aware of whom Etty was as I had assumed, so perhaps a few facts about her life will be in order. She was born of educated Jewish parents in Middelburg, Holland, in 1914. Her secondary education took place in Deventer where there is now a Study Centre devoted to her life and the study of the Holocaust. She read Law and Slavic Languages at university (Amsterdam) in the late 1930s which perhaps was not surprising as her mother was Russian. She moved in Jewish left wing intellectual circles and lived as the housekeeper (and mistress) of a widower, Han Wegerif.

In 1941 she met Julius Spier, a psycho-chirologist, who had been trained by Jung and became part of his circle. He was the love of her life and an enormously beneficial influence on her. Spier introduced her to the Bible and St. Augustine and taught her to deal with her own depressive bent. She read Rilke, who was hugely important to her, and between 1941 and 1943 she kept a diary. This filled eleven exercise books. In 1942 she worked for the Jewish Council, but in July 1942 at her request she was transferred to work at the transit camp at Westerbork. She became quite ill but returned. In July 1943 Etty was permanently at Westerbork. She and her family were sent to

Auschwitz where she died on 30th November 1943. A postcard was dropped from the train which read 'We left the camp singing.'

A word about the diaries themselves. They cover the years 1941-1943 and have now been published in English, notably in the abbreviated form titled *An Interrupted Life*. They are important documentary evidence of the Jewish response to the Holocaust in Holland, but have also become important spiritual reading, especially as they represent a very non ecclesiastical spirituality. They are also important for those who are interested in how human beings respond to physical and emotional extremes, and Etty's life and her response bears comparison with a number of others at this time including Edith Stein and other Christian martyrs of the Holocaust. Etty says that she wishes to chronicle these dark times.

^[10] *I want to become the chronicler of many things from this period of time. (Diary, 13th August 1941)*

And she makes it clear that she is the chronicler of the most terrible things:

"Just now I clambered up on a box in order to count the number of goods wagons, there were 35... The goods wagons were completely closed, here and there a plank had been removed and through the gaps, hands stuck out, waving, just like people drowning. The sky is full of birds and nearby, before our own eyes, mass murder was being perpetrated, it is all so inconceivable. (Diary, 8th June 1943)

But she also recognises that she is engaged upon a particular spiritual exercise and that she wishes the words to be not just an

account, a chronicle, but to come from a deeper place, a place which, through her sufferings she had accessed directly. She says:

And suddenly I was sure again: this is how I want to write. Only words which grow organically within a great silence. Just like that one Japanese picture with the flowering twig downstairs in the corner. A few tender strokes of the pencil.so I would like to pencil in a few words against a wordless background. And it will be more difficult to depict and find the soul of that stillness and silence, than to find the words. (Diary, 13th August 1942)

It actually took Etty a little while to reach that place of stillness and silence and the dairies are a record of her personal development from a very active and sensual woman whose activity disguises an inner turmoil, to somebody who thought of themselves as the thinking and praying heart of a camp devoted to the transportation of thousands of people to their deaths. The dairies begin with an account of her inner turmoil.

[¹¹]She says:

I am accomplished in bed, just about seasoned enough I should think to be counted among the better lovers, and love does indeed suit me to perfection, and yet it remains a mere trifle, set apart from what is truly essential, and deep inside me something is still locked away... deep down something like a tightly-wound ball of twine binds me relentlessly... .

But it is also clear that she desperately wants to put some sort of order into her life and she knows that she has to do this herself and that this is something which must come from within. She writes:

Perhaps it is my task in life, my sole task, to put some order and harmony into that chaos which is myself. I must, no doubt, stop trying to find the answer outside.

And gradually, as you can see if you read through the diaries slowly, she comes to rest in an inner peace and finds herself praying:

Last night, shortly before going to bed, I suddenly went down on my knees in the middle of this large room, between the steel chairs and the matting. Almost automatically. Forced to the ground by something stronger than myself. Some time ago I said to myself. I am a kneeler in training. 'I was still embarrassed by this act, as intimate as gestures of love that cannot be put into words either, except by a poet...

She discovers God within her, at the deepest point:

God I thank You for having given me so much strength: the inner centre regulating my life is becoming stronger and more pivotal all the time... I think I work well with You God, that we work well together. I have assigned an ever larger dwelling space to You, and am beginning to become faithful to You. I hardly ever have to deny You anymore. Nor, at frivolous and shallow moments, do I have to deny my own inner life any longer out of a sense of shame. The powerful centre spreads its rays to the uttermost boundaries.

[12] And she comes to believe that all of life is beautiful, a phrase which she repeats constantly in her diaries:

Yes, life is beautiful and I value it anew at the end of every day. And you must be able to bear your sorrow... you mustn't run

away from it, but bear it like an adult. Do not relieve your feelings through hatred. Do not seek to be avenged on all German mothers, for they too sorrow at this very moment for their slain and murdered sons.

And the diaries end:

I shall simply lie down and try to be a prayer.

I have broken my body like bread and shared it out among men. And why not, they were hungry and had gone without for so long.

We should be willing to act as a balm for all wounds.

There is a great deal more that could be said about Etty's journey of self-discovery in the face of death. Questions have certainly been raised. Some have believed that her writing is hardly genuine, but concocted, something of a literary artifice. Others cannot accept that what she says is real. How can anybody welcome, they say, the enormity of such evil, how can a human being welcome every evil and every suffering as though they were fated to be, as though they were all part of cosmic harmony? Should there not be a greater element of rebellion against such suffering? Of what use is such a mystical approach? Learning from Rilke, Etty even comes to the point where she says that God cannot help us but that we must help him. She says:

You cannot help us, we must help You....

There doesn't seem to be much that You Yourself can do

about our circumstances... neither do I hold You responsible.

*We must safeguard that little piece of You, God, in ourselves.
And perhaps in others as well.*

[13] Ety, of course, was no theologian. She was ignorant of the work of resistance theologians such as Bonhoeffer and Barth who were both active while she was writing, and whose collaboration in the Barmen Declaration led to the establishment of a network of churches and pastors known as The Confessing Church which was in direct opposition to Hitler. Indeed her 'theology', if that is what it was, took a quite different tack. Since the war, of course, the debate between action based theologies (such as those of Bonhoeffer and Barth) and approaches based upon an idea of presence and the redemptive capacity of presence has sharpened, particularly as Christians become more aware of the need to work for a more just and peaceful world. What Ety does is to assert that we can affirm the presence of God in the midst of great suffering and that we can allow that presence in us to become redemptive. Being there, being 'the praying heart of the barracks', was, to her, not useless. This is, of course, all very redolent of Julian, especially Julian's belief that all is in the hands of God and that all shall be well. But this is to jump to conclusions. Before we make too much of the comparison let us turn now to Julian and look a little more closely at her response to the 'death' which she faced in her day.

As we know, Julian asked for death. She asked for 'the mynd of the passion', for 'bodily sickness' and for 'three wounds'. These wounds were:

The wound of true contrition, the wound of loving

compassion, and the wound of longing with my will for God...

Her request for the mind of the passion is, of course, indicative of a shift of interest across Europe in the 13th and 14th centuries from an understanding of Christ as hero, vindicator (a Christology associated with Anselm), to understanding Christ as the suffering one. What we moderns need to understand is that this request was not a desire for some sort of mystical ecstasy, but rather represented a desire by Julian to enter into the passion of Christ and its costly transformation of her life. Her desire for 'wounds' was a favourite way of talking of a number of the Beguine writers, especially Mechthild of Magdeburg, who says:

[14] Whosoever shall be sore wounded by love
Will never become whole
Save he embrace the self-same love
Which wounded him.

In the *Long Text*, Julian develops the imagery of woundedness and relates it to the wounded Christ. Woundedness becomes the means of finding wholeness:

When we come up and receive that sweet reward which grace has made for us, there we shall bless and thank our Lord, endlessly rejoicing that we ever suffered woe; and that will be because of a property of the blessed love which we shall know in God, which we might never have known without woe preceding it... . (Chapter 48, Long Text)

An embrace of 'woundedness' appears strange to modern ears, just as Etty's movement to embrace the suffering of her days caused

Todorov to question her authenticity, but Grace Jantzen points out that:

In spite of their strangeness to modern conceptions, solid commonsense pervades these prayers. Julian was not praying for visions for their own sakes, or for strange spiritual or physical occurrences to gratify a religious mania. She was praying rather for greater integration, compassion and generosity; and it seemed to her that these means would enable her to develop them.

In all sorts of ways the same could be said of Ety Hillesum. Both women recognise that bodily suffering, or 'woundedness' is somehow 'of use'. It is not neutral nor a purely negative experience, which is, sadly, the modern understanding. It is 'of use', particularly when placed within some sort of theological or transcendental reference. Julian knew this instinctively, Ety slowly came to realise it through her experience.

But Julian does not stop there. She not only asks for death but has a vision of the crucified and dying Christ, which is vouchsafed to her. So ^[15]she records the vision complete with 'the red blood running down from under the crown, hot and flowing freely and copiously'. But once again this is not simply a gruesome vision; it leads to a further understanding, this time of the Trinity:

And in the same revelation, suddenly the Trinity filled my heart full of the greatest joy, and I understood that it will be so in heaven without end to all who will come there.

This is interesting because for us, perhaps because of the Protestant legacy still within us, in spite of everything, the crucifix is indelibly

associated with the atonement, the saving power of Christ's death, but for Julian the vision of the crucifix is the gateway to God, to the immensity of the Trinity. Moreover, the Trinity is described in totally integrating language, inclusive and binding together. 'The Trinity is our maker, protector, everlasting lover...' And while the term 'Mother' comes later in the *Long Text* we can begin to see the foundation for that here. 'Mother' develops out of her theology of the Trinity; it is a metaphor for the all-inclusive and enfolding love of God. So the embrace of the crucifix, the embrace of death is also an embrace which allows us to be bound into God.

Julian's vision of God is, moreover, not simply an integrating one, a God who 'encloses' us, but also a totally sustaining one. God it is, we discover as we read on, especially in the Third Revelation, who never lets anything fall from his hand. This means, and Julian states it clearly, that there can be no such thing as chance, for God does everything:

So I understood in this revelation of love, for know well that in our Lord's sight there is not chance; and therefore I was compelled to admit that everything which is done is well done, for our Lord does everything.

And she continues:

See, I am God. See, I am in all things. See, I do all things. See, I never remove my hands from my works, nor ever shall without end. See I guide all things to the end that I ordain them for, ^[16] before time began, with the same power and wisdom and love with which I made them; how should anything be amiss?"

This again is moving stuff, especially as she was writing in the midst of the most terrible suffering and in the midst of so much conflict. How could she say this? For Julian God is not just the creator, not just the sustainer, but the author of all things in the present. Though it might appear that men or the evil one is in control, in and through appearances God is doing everything and doing it well. 'How should anything be amiss?'

For as we saw with Ety this is a remarkable assertion. But towards the end of her 'Showings' Julian makes another remarkable and related assertion, namely that at the deepest part of the soul Christ the Lord dwells continuously. She says:

I saw the soul as wide as it were an endless citadel and also as it were a blessed kingdom... In the midst of that city sits our Lord Jesus, true God and true man... He sits erect there in the soul, in peace and in rest, and he rules and guards heaven and earth and everything that is.

This is the source of her statement that nothing can be amiss, because Christ the Lord sits erect in the soul and rules everything that is.

Julian made the same discoveries that Ety made. Like Ety she discovered God at the bottom of her being, which is the place where God says, 'I am the ground of your beseeching.' Like Ety Julian has an enormously powerful understanding of the participation of the soul in God in which all the ills of the world are redeemed by love. And Julian's vision of the all-embracing Trinity relates well to Ety's statements about 'being in your arms, O God'.

I believe it is remarkable that either Etty or Julian can even begin to think in these ways when faced with the sort of 'deaths' which they did. They both came through to seeing things in the most positive and ^[17]hopeful ways, partly because the suffering they faced and embraced drove them deep into themselves. They were forced to the depths of their beings and there made remarkable discoveries - that God had not abandoned them or his world, that 'Life was beautiful' and that 'all would be well'. Perhaps this sort of discovery can only be made when we suffer and bear that suffering well?

I think it is interesting that the deeply affirmative vision of things that Julian propounds, which in many ways was not so unusual in the middle ages, was cruelly and dishonestly removed from the hearts of Christian people at the Reformation and replaced by a much more cynical and negative view of human nature which still inhabits us. The importance of Etty is that it is vouchsafed to her, a secularised Jewish woman, to rekindle something of that vision for us in the 21st century. One of the few positive things about the Holocaust is that it forced people to think differently about how they saw God.

Etty and a number of other writers, like Paul Celan, are among those pioneers who ask how we shall now talk about God. Etty asks us to use a different theological language, a language which is not transfixed by post reformation ways of talking, but one in which God is simply 'you' and where we live best by a movement of the soul towards 'you' and towards each other. For her the self is not an isolated 'I' but simply a movement or set of movements, and she suggests that to accept and live by this new way of being 'self', where the 'self' is best defined as 'movement towards the other' or 'welcome to the other', and to do theology by this new way of 'speaking', where theological language is more a 'word out of silence', rather than a set of fixed theological constructs, this is to live

theologically, that is 'before God'. I believe that in rediscovering this way of living before God, Etty had found something which Julian knew and practised instinctively, but where even Julian, the Christian solitary, had to delve deep into herself and find herself in serious conflict with the church of her day, in order to speak in this way. In this way both Etty and Julian are subversives, subversive of official Christian ways of talking and being and we need them now when we risk falling into the trap of thinking that there must always be some sense in official ways of talking about God.

I want to end this lecture with two quotations. They are both about the ^[18]importance of suffering well, which is really the brunt of both Julian and Etty's messages to us. The first is from the theologian FC Bauerschmidt:

Christians can have hope in disaster. Julian's words 'all shall be well' are not a counsel of inaction. Rather, the belief that every event is enfolded in the being and action of God can liberate Christians from the tedious need to safeguard their lives, thus opening them to the risk of imitating Christ's compassion.

The other is from a secular source, from Alain de Botton's reflections on Proust, called *How Proust Can Change Your Life*. He says:

In Proust's view, we don't really learn anything properly until there is a problem, until we are in pain, until something fails to go as we had hoped... He tells us that there are two methods by which a person can acquire wisdom, painlessly via a teacher or painfully via life, and he proposes that the painful variety is the far superior... 'Infirmity alone makes us take notice and learn, and enables us to analyse processes which we would otherwise know

nothing about... .

Melvyn Matthews



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