

Refuge in the Storm:
A Meditation on Etty Hillesum
by Joyce Reiser Kornblatt

I am a Jewish woman, a Buddhist practitioner, and Auschwitz has been my life-long koan. A koan is a Zen question which conventional logic cannot penetrate, a puzzle which defeats the rational mind, a mystery into which all categories of prior knowledge collapse. Only through such surrender to not-knowing does the unconditioned truth of life reveal itself. My immersion in the ‘Auschwitz koan’ has not been a formal one, drawn from the canonical Zen texts, but it remains profound and necessary. If I have had a teacher in this ongoing unfoldment, it is a young Dutch woman Etty Hillesum, from an assimilated Jewish family, who left behind her diary and letters of 1941-1943. She died at thirty, in Auschwitz, in September, 1944. Already a bohemian intellectual steeped in psychology and literature (especially Jung, Rilke and the Russians), her hopes for an accomplished writing life are prefigured in this single document of personal testimony. A friend to whom she entrusted the journals showed them to publishers after the war, but none were interested. It took thirty-eight years for the book to become available to the world, and many now consider it to be one of the major moral documents of humankind.

“We left the camp singing,” she wrote on a card she dropped from the Auschwitz-bound train as it pulled out of Westerbork, the transit camp through which 103,000 Dutch Jews would pass on their way to the gas chambers in Poland. Etty had voluntarily joined the first round-up when she could have gone into hiding. With the privileges she maintained for a time as a member of the Jewish Council, she was initially free to travel back and forth between Amsterdam and the remote northern outpost she knew would become her own eventual prison as well. She carried letters from the camp, she brought back medicines, she

delivered secret messages to the Resistance. In Westerbork's hospital, she consoled and nursed as many as she could. She looked after her parents and brothers, who had joined her in the increasingly hellish conditions shared by all of those who awaited with dread the weekly deportations 'to the east.' She was without illusion: "Very well then, this new certainty, that what they are after is our total destruction.... And soon the ring will be closed and no one at all will be able to come to our aid. All the little loopholes that are still left will soon be stopped up."

It is her singing in the face of catastrophe that has become my koan. She herself recognized the paradoxical nature of her own journey: "I cannot find the right words for that radiant feeling inside me, which encompasses but is untouched by all the suffering and all the violence." This radiance expressed itself as love. Those who knew Etty Hillesum during her years in Westerbork and the final months in Auschwitz suggest that her compassion for others never wavered. "We should be willing to act as a balm for all wounds," she wrote in her last diary entry. This was Etty Hillesum's form of *tikkun olam*, the Jewish pledge to repair the world. This is the altruism of a Bodhisattva, the person who vows to live, impossibly and necessarily, for the sake of saving all beings. Zen roshi Joan Sutherland describes this as "taking refuge *in* the storm." This was Etty's ongoing aspiration: "I want to be the thinking heart of the barracks," she wrote. Joan Halifax, another Zen teacher, says: "The heart of the Bodhisattva is always turned toward other beings... with no attachment to outcome, with a spirit of radical optimism."

What I want to penetrate with my own thinking heart is Etty Hillesum's Bodhisattva spirit. Is her loving courage a possibility for all of us? How did the terrible circumstances of her last years yield the ripening of her depth? In what soil did her goodness flourish? How could faith flower in the presence of Nazi sadism and the suffering it engendered? "They are without mercy," she acknowledged, even as she resisted hatred for her captors. What grows

from ashes? Buddhist teacher Marcia Rose says, “In the midst of the scenario of extermination, Etty wrote the counter-scenario.” She wrote it with words and with actions, with speech and with silence. She took ‘refuge *in* the storm’ with four embodied vows that honed her aliveness into a luminous and enduring presence. In a factory of death, what shines?

Service, bearing witness, writing and contemplation: these were the facets of Etty Hillesum’s living mandala. Within a circle of barbed wire, she inscribed with her own existence a design of wholeness. This journey toward integration of the highest order—what Jung called *individuation*—speaks to a universal quest each of us is asked to undergo in the crucible of our mortal years. For Etty, it was the fire of the Holocaust that tempered her soul. For us, it may be a cancer diagnosis, a suicide in the family, a hurricane, a crippling subway bombing. Etty did not feel that her suffering or the responses she brought to it were limited to her particular historical cataclysm:

One moment it is Hitler, the next one it is Ivan the

Terrible; one moment it is resignation and the next war, pestilence, earthquake or famine. Ultimately, what matters most is to bear the pain, to cope with it and to keep a small corner of one’s soul unsullied, come what may. (191)

Service

We should try and be a balm for all wounds. Though Etty Hillesum’s journal is famous as a document of an unvanquished inner life, it is also a record of love in action. Rooted in a growing understanding of interdependence, she knew that the suffering of others was no other than her own. Thus, she had a relationship of equality with those she served. “When I suffer for the vulnerable,” she asked, “is it not for my own vulnerability that I really suffer?” She was not without moments of judgement and disappointment in herself and others. She was

sometimes overwhelmed by the sheer press of need, and the dwindling availability of any private space at all. People succumbing to despair and selfishness could unsettle her. But in her ongoing self-inquiry, of which she kept such an eloquent record, she acknowledged her pride and grew beyond it. “What I keep discovering is that there is no causal connection between people’s behavior and the love you feel for them,’ she wrote in a letter to a friend when ‘writing days’ were still permitted at Westerbork. What shines through is the power of her tenderness in her encounters with her doomed peers. “I embark now on a slow voyage of exploration with everyone who comes to me.” Giving, she received, sustained by those she supported. Writing about his work with hospice patients, Frank Ostaseski says: “When the heart is undivided, everything we encounter becomes our practice. Service becomes a sacred exchange, like breathing in and breathing out.”

Bearing Witness

For the last twelve years, Zen teacher Bernie Glassman has been leading interfaith retreats in Aushwitz. For five days and nights, participants live in the camp, sit and meditate on the train tracks, call out the names of the dead, walk through the barracks, chant in the ruins of the crematoria. At the start, Bernie says, people “...seemed numb. For seeing Aushwitz the first time is like a blow to the head. It leaves people’s minds blank....They’d lost control. They were in a space of unknowing.” (15) It is precisely in this space that bearing witness becomes possible. This is an act that creates meaning for the self by offering up the self for the sake of others. In the case of these retreatants, it is “...for the souls left at Aushwitz, cut off from life quickly and unable to find rest.” In the act of bearing witness, our hearts break

open and become the vast containers for whatever collective human grief we are asked to shelter.

For Etty Hillesum, her journal and letters begin as the outpouring of a young woman's tumultuous inner life and transform, in the course of two harrowing years, into a narrative that gives voice to a shared human tragedy. It is a commitment supported by and supportive of an ever-deepening mystical faith. "There must be someone to live through it all and bear witness to the fact that God lived, even in these times. And why should I not be that witness?" Jan Garlaandt, who finally published Etty's journal, reminds us that her faith in no way separated her from the world. "Her vision had nothing to do with escape or self-deception, and everything to do with a hard-won, steady and whole perception of reality."

(xv)

Hard-won. Witness that is borne, shouldered, endured. She did this, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, says, to guarantee "...that certain things do not disappear from the human landscape." To bear witness is to honor the future as much as the past, to rebuild a shattered generational bridge. Through one's writing or painting or oral testimony or stories whispered to a family member—*This is what happened, this is how it was*—the dead and the not-yet-conceived find a meeting place. A ruptured continuity is repaired. "My heart is a floodgate," Etty wrote, "for a never-ending tide of misery." (207) The despair of suffering transmutes into a meaning that does not pretend to comprehend or minimize or armor. "The human suffering that we have seen during the last six months, and still see daily, is more than anyone can be asked to comprehend." (250)

Survivor and esteemed historian Saul Friedlander reminds us how the accounts of victims "...can shake our well-protected representation of events. They can stop us in our tracks. They can restore our initial sense of disbelief, before knowledge rushes in to smother it." It

was her embrace of not-knowing that allowed Etty to persevere in her witnessing, to carry out her Bodhisattva's task to the end.

Writing

Through the act of writing, Etty Hillesum consecrates her experience. Writing becomes a sacred practice in a profane time. We see her dedication to her gift in the earliest journal entries: "I shall have to sweat blood to rid my style of all that pathos if I am ever to make anything of it, but really it's all a matter of looking for the right words." (13) As she keeps the diary her mentor and lover, the older psychologist Julius Spier, has suggested, she begins to glean the depth of personal support such an undertaking offers. "I must make sure I keep up with my writing, that is, with myself, or else...I shall run the risk of losing my way."

As a meditation practice, writing becomes a path for Etty, a discipline that serves her as much as she serves it. (19) As conditions worsen, her aesthetic develops. The power of compression and precision compel her. Looking at Japanese prints, she realizes, "That's how I want to write. With that much space round a few words....All that words should do is to lend the silence form and contours." She came to master the telling detail, and the stakes for this stylistic achievement were high. For Etty, writing becomes both a communal act and a private prayer. As she documents the fate of the Dutch Jews with the concrete and harrowing immediacy of a great novelist, she also conducts on the page dialogues with herself and with her God. The same process turns her outward and inward, and in this way her human capacities deepen. Her notebooks and pen become the agents of her maturation and the record of it. Writing gives her the capacity to turn away from nothing: "The sky is full of birds, the purple lupins stand up so regally and peacefully, two little old women have sat down on a box for a chat—and right before our eyes, mass murder. The whole thing is simply beyond comprehension." (274)

Contemplation

Uncomprehending, Etty Hillesum learns to pray. This is not the praying of a woman to a religious God who can be fathomed, or who exists outside her own heart. And yet it is an intimate act that sustains and comforts her. “And I listen to myself, allow myself to be led, not by anything on the outside, but by what wells up from deep within.” (79) Her mystical sources are varied: the Jewish and Christian Bibles, Rilke’s poetry. “We go too far in fearing for our unhappy bodies, while our forgotten spirit shrivels up in some corner.”

Her faith is the actualization of her life. “I repose in myself. And that part of myself, that deepest and richest part in which I repose, is what I call ‘God.’” This resonates for me with Buddhist teacher Sharon Salzberg’s observation: “The word we normally translate as *faith* from the Pali language, the language of the original Buddhist texts, is saddhà, which literally means “to place the heart upon.” Saddhà means to give our hearts over to, or place our hearts upon something.” In her hours of contemplation and prayer, Etty Hillesum gives herself over to her own heart. As Eva Hoffman writes in her introduction to the journal and letters, “Etty Hillesum lived at a time when the macrocosm of historical events almost completely crushed the microcosm of individual lives. It was her act of enormous resistance to reverse this order of importance, to assert that the microcosm of the soul can encompass the external world and, in addition, hold infinite space.” (xi)

From that infinite space, Etty’s singing arose. When I think of her extraordinary passage from self-absorbed girl to selfless bodhisattva, when I read the journals and letters in which her soul found language for what could not be said, the Auschwitz koan begins to reveal itself to me. Etty separated herself from nothing, and so nothing could defeat her. Eva Hoffman says, “Because she had looked at herself so closely, she refused to engage in

projection or collective hatred—to declare that all evil existed within the enemy, and all goodness inside ‘us.’” (xii)

In the end, it is her deep inclusive humanity that saves her, and might save us as well. When I picture her, as I often do, boarding that freight car, packed with precious and doomed human beings, and dropping her valiant postcard into our hands as a final gift—*We have left the camp singing*—I think of a poem by Dan Pagis which breaks the heart and heals it in the same moment:

written in pencil in the sealed railway-car
here in this carload
i am eve
with abel my son
if you see my other son
cain son of man
tell him that i

Just as it is left for us to sit with that truncated poem, so it is left for us to meet Etty Hillesum’s magnificent truncated life. The ground of our meeting is a death camp, where we reflect with her, *the thinking heart of the barracks*, on mass murder, purple lupins, and an undefeated reverence for life.

- Joyce Kornblatt, PARABOLA MAGAZINE , Winter 2008
