

Julian of Norwich

Short Biography

In the 14th century, a number of English men and women withdrew from the world. They lived alone as hermits or anchorites. Their hermitage, or cell, was a small room attached to a local church. Each room had two windows. One pierced the church wall. Through this window, the anchorite received communion. Through the second window, the anchorite received food brought to him or her by village people.

As a young woman, Julian, who was born about 1342, became an anchorite at the Church of St. Edmund and St. Julian in Norwich. Until her death in about 1420, at the age of 78, Julian stayed in her simple room. Like most anchorites, she probably prayed, fasted, did penance, studied, sewed clothing for the poor, and advised the village people.

But, like several other anchorites at that time, Julian also wrote a book, *Revelations of Divine Love*. In it, she described her 16 visions of Jesus. As she wrote this book about God's great compassion for us, Julian developed a special vocabulary. She called the Creator our mother and our father. She called Jesus the Redeemer our brother.

Julian—whose book is thought to be the oldest surviving book written by a woman in English—wrote during a period of great suffering and uncertainty. The 100 Years War between England and France began before she was born and continued long after she died. As often accompanies war, famine was prevalent throughout England. Perhaps most catastrophic of all, she wrote during a time of pandemic: the decimation of much of Europe's population by the bubonic plague. Three outbreaks occurred in her city throughout her life, and she herself nearly died, from plague or some other ravaging disease. All in all, the pain must have seemed overwhelming: suffering was everywhere. Many in her day attributed the horror to the wrath of God. Perhaps it is surprising, then, that her theological response is not one of despair or judgment, but of love, solidarity, and hope.

At the time of Julian's death, people from all over Europe traveled to her room, or cell, to ask her advice. Everyone recognized that she was

close to God. The Church never formally declared her a saint, but through the ages, people have called her “Blessed.”

Spirituality of Julian of Norwich

When she was struck down with illness she experienced a number of visions, which have been passed down to us in her book “The Revelations of Divine Love” or the “Showings”. In a seemingly paradoxical move, one who lived in isolation passed down to us an understanding of a God who is in essence relational: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in relationship with one another and with humanity through the solidarity of the person of Jesus.

Indeed, Julian uses highly relational language to describe God and Jesus and their relationship to humanity: mother, father, brother, and spouse. God, in this sense, is imminent and connected. This highly relational God has created a world in which everything that exists, exists through the love of God. God makes, loves, and protects, and thus the relational love and action of God permeate all of life.

You may have heard the story about the hazelnut. Julian describe one of her visions:

“And in this he showed me a little thing, the quantity of a hazel nut, lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed. And it was as round as any ball. I looked upon it with the eye of my understanding, and thought, “what may this be?”

And it was answered generally thus, ‘It is all that is made.’ (all creation)

I marveled how it might last, for I thought it might suddenly have fallen to nothing for littleness.

And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and ever shall, for God loves it. And so have all things their beginning by the love of God.

In this little thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it. The second that God loves it, and the third, that God keeps it."

She goes on to reflect how human life is filled with angst because we seek our "rest"—our sense of identity, purpose, and pleasure—in the littleness of created things, rather than the vastness of Divine love.

Julian looked at the suffering around her and saw not the punishment of God, but the love of God extending into every nook and cranny to meet and find us in it. And nothing demonstrated this more for her than the example of Jesus himself—just as we suffer, so did Jesus. God does not stay above the fray, so to speak, but enters into our suffering in solidarity.

According to Julian, the Lord wants us to know four things: (1) He is our ground from whom and through whom we have all our life and our very being; (2) He protects us powerfully and with the greatest mercy even when we are mired in our own confusion; (3) He courteously "keeps us and makes us know that we go amiss." For Julian, Christ is our watchful mother. (4) How faithfully he waits for us: "For he wills that we be turned and oned to him in love as he is to us."

In the course of reflecting on her revelations, Julian came to realize that since the Second Person of the Trinity gives birth to the entire creation ("for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created") that Christ must be our essential and truest mother. Julian centers her maternal theology entirely on and within the Trinity, in the on-going act of creation and in the divine process of one-ing. She considers the Motherhood of the Son of God as perfectly equal to the fatherhood of the Father. God is our mother as truly as God is our father. All that exists and is good reflects God, mothers as well as fathers. For Julian, Christ's motherhood is not a mere metaphor. It is part of divine revelation.

Julian repeatedly affirms all "the teaching of holy church" and leaves it to a "secret" in God as to just how all things shall be made well

Saint Julian's and Our Times: The Plague and Pandemic

Julian lived from 1342 to approximately 1416; which means that she survived one of the most storied and terrifying pandemics of western history: the Great Pestilence, what we now call "the black death" —

during which the bubonic plague ravaged England between 1348 and 1350. It would have come to Norwich when Julian was still a child.

It is believed that approximately *one-third* of the population of England may have succumbed to the plague — and in Norwich, the death toll may have been even higher, claiming up to one-half of the city's thirteen thousand inhabitants. And if that first devastating pandemic wasn't bad enough, England suffered additional outbreaks of the plague at least four more times during Julian's life.

Julian herself does not mention the plague in her book of *Showings*. That, in itself, is quite remarkable, but there is much about Julian's own life that remains shrouded in mystery. Even her name is hidden from us; she is called Julian after her parish church in Norwich (it would be as if I were known as "Thomas More" because I'm a member of St. Thomas More Parish). Virtually all the personal details of her life were left unmentioned in her writing; she simply did not see the point of telling her own story. Ultimately, we must be content knowing that for the most part we simply *don't* know about Julian's life — all we have is her brilliant book detailing the spirituality of her "showings" or visions/revelations of divine love.

But while Julian may have chosen not to write directly about her experience surviving multiple outbreaks of the plague, we can still read between the lines and discern some advice from this medieval mystic about how to survive the uncertainty that comes with an infectious disease pandemic. Indeed, we see four ways that Julian speaks to us even here in the 21st century.

1. **Social Distancing is a good thing.** While Julian does not write about her life circumstances, a commentary on her book, probably added by an unknown scribe, identifies her as a "recluse" or " anchoress" living in Norwich. In other words, she lived a life of intentional solitude, "anchored" to her parish church (St. Julian's) by inhabiting an enclosed cell adjacent to the sanctuary. Julian very likely lived in such a hermit-like way for anywhere from 20 to 40 years, which means she probably survived at least two outbreaks of the plague by remaining in spiritual solitude. This does not mean everyone is meant to be a solitary or a hermit! Clearly, for Julian, this was a religious vocation. But if 21st-century people have a hard time understanding why a healthy woman would have chosen a life

of enforced isolation, perhaps “social distancing” is the clue that makes it easy to understand. Keeping a prudent distance from others helps to slow down the spread of the disease — and may well keep you alive.

2. **Keep your distance — but stay connected.** Julian never mentions it, but we know from the autobiographical *Book of Margery Kempe* that Julian, even in solitude, worked as a spiritual director. In other words, she remained in relationship with others, even if behind the safety of a screen. For that matter, going to the trouble to write her book — the first book by a woman in the English language — was another way that she endeavored to keep “in touch” — if not physically, then spiritually. Julian knew that human beings are meant for relationship, and in the challenges of a pandemic, we must be creative about finding ways to keep our relatedness alive and well.
3. **Stay positive.** Julian is renowned for her optimism and her faith in both God’s love and Christ’s saving acts. “All shall be well,” she proclaimed, earning her a shout-out in the luminous conclusion of T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*. But Julian’s sound bite is actually the cornerstone of her entire philosophical outlook — and what a positive outlook it was! She speaks repeatedly of not only God’s and Christ’s love, but also their joy, courtesy, and “homeliness” (what we might call their “down-to-earth-ness.”). Despite the fact that we live in a world marred by suffering, sin and death (infectious or otherwise), for Julian there was never a need to despair. Hope is the birthright of all people of faith. It sees us through the ordinary passage of our days, and it also is the beacon of light in difficult times as well.
4. **Pray.** Julian filtered everything in her life through a vivid and generous prayer life — and it’s also clear that Julian kept prayer as an integral part of an overall mindfully lived life. Prayer does not render prudence unnecessary: I pray for God’s protection, and I still lock my doors. Both actually go together well: the locked door is an act of prudence, and the prayer is an act of trust. Without locking the door, prayer is a form of escapism; but without prayer, the locked doors can become an expression of paranoia. Julian, as a woman dedicated to prayer, understood that isolating herself from infectious disease by itself was not enough. She had to balance her prudent actions with the generous gesture of trust. In this way, she was able to preserve both her optimism and her faith. We can all balance prayer and prudent action to remain both safe and faith-full during this uncertain time when we are not yet sure how dangerous

or widespread COVID-19 will prove to be. Let us all pray for good health, for comfort and healing for those afflicted, and for the many women and men who are working hard to develop vaccines and otherwise take measures that will keep all people safe.

Sayings of the Saint

“But Jesus, who in this Vision informed me of all that is necessary for me, answered and said: It was necessary that there should be sin; but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.”

“Pray, even if you feel nothing, see nothing. For when you are dry, empty, sick or weak, at such a time is your prayer most pleasing to God, even though you may find little joy in it. This is true of all believing prayer.”

“For we are so preciously loved by God that we cannot even comprehend it. No created being can ever know how much and how sweetly and tenderly God loves them. It is only with the help of his grace that we are able to persevere in spiritual contemplation with endless wonder at his high, surpassing, immeasurable love which our Lord in his goodness has for us.”

“God loved us before he made us; and his love has never diminished and never shall.”

"The greatest honor we can give Almighty God is to live gladly because of the knowledge of his love."

“He said not 'Thou shalt not be tempested, thou shalt not be travailed, thou shalt not be dis-eased'; but he said, 'Thou shalt not be overcome.’”

“This is our Lord's will... that our prayer and our trust be, alike, large.”

“The fullness of Joy is to behold God in everything.”

“Every act of kindness and compassion done by any man for his fellow Christian is done by Christ working within him.”

“As truly as God is our Father, so truly God is our Mother.”

“Our Savior is our true Mother in whom we are endlessly born and out of whom we shall never come.”
