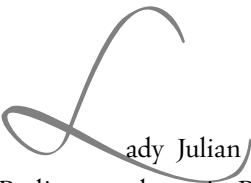


JULIAN OF NORWICH
Our Companion in Serious Illness
(1342–1413)

ady Julian of Norwich. First English woman of letters. Rediscovered mystic. Renowned spiritual director of her time. Famed for optimism in the midst of the darkness of the fourteenth century. A marvelous spiritual companion for anyone coping with serious illness or disability.

Even though we know little about her life, Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love*, written in 1373 and still quite popular today, is a spiritual classic that recounts the visions of Jesus Christ granted to Julian while she was close to death. It ranks as a spiritual classic for many reasons, but is particularly important to those of us with disabilities or illnesses because of its themes of sickness as purification, its constant reminder of God's profound love for us, and its famed emphasis on optimism: "All shall be well."

Biographical details about Julian's life are sketchy. She was most likely born in 1342, was perhaps a Benedictine nun before becoming

an anchorite and, despite her claim to being a “simple unlettered creature,” was obviously familiar with Scripture and contemporary theological thinking. We do know one critically important date in her life—May 8, 1373, the day on which she received sixteen successive revelations (or “showings,” as she called them) while deathly ill.

Some years before receiving these “showings,” Julian had asked for three gifts from God: (1) to understand Christ’s Passion, (2) to be ill to the point of death, and (3) to have three wounds from God: true contrition, genuine compassion and sincere longing for God.

For anyone today who deals with the physical pain and emotional struggles of serious illness, it is amazing to think that someone could actually *pray* to God to be sickened to the point of death. Julian, however, is quite specific about her request: “[I] freely desiring that sickness [to be] so hard as to death, that I might in that sickness receive all my rites of Holy Church, myself thinking that I should die, and that all creatures might suppose the same that saw me: for I would have no manner of comfort of earthly life.”¹ She then tells why she makes this mind-boggling prayer: “And this I meant for [that] I would be purged, by the mercy of God, and afterward live more to the worship of God because of that sickness.”² Julian asked to be spared nothing of the suffering of the fear, grief and pain that accompany the dying process. “In this sickness I desired to have all manner of pains bodily and ghostly that I should have if I should die, (with all the dreads and tempests of the fiends) except the out-passing of the soul.”³ She did add a caveat: “if it be Thy will that I have it.”⁴

Incredible! Even given the medieval emphasis on asceticism and the fact that as an anchoress Julian’s whole life was dedicated to God, to actually *ask* God for a terminal illness is simply stunning to us today. What possible motivation could someone, even a devoted anchoress of the fourteenth century, have for making such a bizarre request? What did she need to be “purified” from that she would ask the God who loved her to put her so close to death? To ask to be so ill that not

only she, but all those around her, would also believe that she was dying? Most of all, how can this wonderful fourteenth-century woman mystic be a companion to us today and teach us about suffering, illness and love?

Before we explore these questions, let us look at the life of Julian and how her beautiful, mystical classic *Revelations of Divine Love* came into being.

Background

Norwich, a port city in southeast England, was a bustling center of commerce and learning in Julian's day. Ships sailed to and from the continent, bringing merchandise, foreigners and, unfortunately, the germs that helped to spread the Black Death, or bubonic plague, that ravaged the fourteenth century. This century was a tumultuous time marked not only by the plague, but also by the Hundred Years War between England and France, frequent famines and the Great Schism, the period in the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic church when there were two competing claimants to the papacy. Julian's divinely inspired optimism of "All shall be well" is even more remarkable against the backdrop of this dark century.

The Life of an anchoress

The life of an anchoress included not only spiritual direction of others, but many hours spent in prayer and solitude. Julian's "anchorhold" was a small room attached to the Church of St. Julian in Norwich. It had one small window into the church (the Anchoresses' Rule recommended that the day begin with a "visit" to the Blessed Sacrament every morning) and another small window through which food could be passed and spiritual advice sought and given. Often the anchoress had a "maiden," or servant, who tended to her needs of buying and preparing food, and generally kept the anchorhouse tidy. Also, cats were permitted to ward off the ubiquitous mice and rats of medieval times.

We know quite a bit about the anchoritic lifestyle because the *Ancrene Wisse* (*Anchoress' Guide*), composed by an unknown author in the West Midlands of England, has come down through the centuries nearly intact. The *Ancrene Wisse* was both a practical and a spiritual guide, advising its charges on a plethora of topics ranging from dietary regulations (“Between meals you should not eat, snack, nibble fruit or anything”⁵) to clothing (“it does not matter if your clothes are white or black, so long as they are plain, warm and well-made”⁶). There is a long discussion about the etiquette of when to wear and when not to wear a wimple. Much counsel is given regarding the relationship between the anchoress and her “maiden,” the author being quite clear that the spiritual life of the servant is decidedly the responsibility of her mistress: “[I]f they sin through your negligence, you will be called to account for it before the high judge.”⁷ Therefore, “teach them earnestly to keep their rule, both for your sake and theirs—gently and lovingly, for so women’s teaching ought to be.”⁸ Despite the stern tone that pervades the *Ancrene Wisse*, the author takes care to allow for flexibility and individual need, advising the anchoresses in the end to follow the guide “according to your strength.”⁹

Obviously, only someone profoundly in love with God could choose the rigorous lifestyle of an anchoress. The anchoritic lifestyle was a radical one, even for the fourteenth century: “The ceremony of enclosure...was for all practical purposes a kind of burial. Extreme unction was given, and the anchorite was literally sealed in, obliged under threat of excommunication to remain there until death.”¹⁰ This certainly does not sound like an appealing lifestyle to us today. However, the anchoritic way of life did provide the space necessary for contemplative prayer, freeing the woman from living in the medieval households that were cramped, smoky and overflowing with people. Moreover, a woman who chose to be a “Martha” and marry and bear children worked from dawn until dusk in the ceaseless drudgery of running a medieval household. For the “Marys,” those women with a

deep propensity for contemplative prayer, the space and solitude that the anchorhold provided were perhaps a blessing. And, in Julian's case, this radical anchoritic lifestyle has given the world a mystic whose message is both profound and timeless.

Suffering

One aspect of the life of an anchoress was the emphasis on Christ's Passion. The anchoress was called to be continually aware of Christ's suffering: from the moment she arose, she was to acknowledge the crucifix on the altar of her church. Each day the hour from noon to one was spent in special prayer in honor of Christ's last hour on earth. The many daily sufferings of the anchoress were continually viewed through the lens of the sufferings of Christ, with the goal of becoming more like him through identification with his Passion: "[n]ight and day you are up on God's cross,"¹¹ exhorted the *Ancrene Wisse*.

Although the austerity of the life of an anchoress may hold little appeal for contemporary women or men, the wisdom that anchoresses have passed down through the centuries can be invaluable to anyone searching for spiritual meaning in illness, disability or suffering of any type. Our contemporary culture tends to reject and fear suffering, thereby rejecting and fearing the people who experience it. This cultural bias can often make it terribly difficult to accept that the pain of one's life—whether loss, addiction or physical or mental illness—not only has meaning, but is also a continual invitation to grow closer in union with the crucified Jesus.

Julian's Sickness

Against this background, it is somewhat easier to understand Julian of Norwich's plea to God to contract a terminal illness if it be the divine will: "And when I was thirty years old and a half, God sent me a bodily sickness, in which I lay three days and three nights; and on the fourth night I took all my rites of Holy Church, and weened not to have lived till day."¹² The deathly illness continued for three more

days, with Julian and those attending her believing several times that she had died. As she lay apparently dying, Julian began to lament the fact of her imminent demise and wished to live longer, but only for one reason: “But it was to have lived that I might have loved God better, and longer time.”¹³ As always, Julian’s heart was set on what God wanted first: “And I understood by my reason and by my feeling of my pains that I should die; and I assented fully with all the will of my heart to be at God’s will.”¹⁴ God had granted her request: a terminal illness with its accompanying physical, emotional and spiritual agonies.

After assuring God that all she truly sought was the divine will, Julian began to experience paralysis in her lower body: “my body was dead from the middle downwards, as to my feeling.”¹⁵ She asked to be set upright in her bed with her head tilted toward heaven, “thinking on God while my life would last.”¹⁶

A curate was sent for to administer the last rites. The priest placed a crucifix before Julian and bade her to look upon the image of her Savior. Though she thought that her heavenward gaze was sufficient remembrance of God at her dying moment, Julian, ever the obedient daughter of the church, “assented to set my eyes on the face of the Crucifix.”¹⁷ As she did so, she began to lose her vision—all she could perceive was darkness—with one exception: the image of the crucifix.

Next her upper body weakened, making her breathing heavy and labored. It was at this point that Julian believed herself clinically dead. It was also precisely at this exact time that she revived: “And in this [moment] suddenly all my pain was taken from me, and I was as whole (and specially in the upper part of my body) as ever I was afore.”¹⁸

Julian was convinced that her miraculous recovery was from God: “I marveled at this sudden change; for methought it was a privy working of God, and not of nature.”¹⁹ She then recalled her earlier prayer,

in which she had prayed that she would be granted both physical and mental experience of the Passion of Christ. Why? Quite simply because “I desired to suffer with Him.”²⁰

Immediately after making this appeal to God, the first of the sixteen revelations began. Not surprisingly, after the prayer request she had just uttered, the very first “showing” is of Christ’s head surrounded by the crown of thorns: “In this [moment] suddenly I saw the red blood trickle down from under the Garland hot and freshly and right plenteously.”²¹

Julian of Norwich’s singularly privileged mystical journey had begun.

The Showings

Throughout the remainder of that day and night, Julian was granted a series of sixteen exceedingly vivid mystical visions involving Christ, Mary, the Trinity and God as both Father and Mother. Her mystical experience, she tells us, started at four in the morning and continued for almost twenty-four hours. Realizing the importance of her “showings,” she wrote them down—twice. She wrote the first version, known as the Short Text, soon after her mystical experience. Over the next twenty years, she continued to meditate upon their significance, writing a fuller version, the Long Text, which more fully explicates their meaning. Using beautifully simple Old English imagery (God as our “Maker, Keeper, Lover,” for example), Julian felt called to share the depth and significance of her showings with her “even-Christians,” her touchingly egalitarian term for her fellow believers.

Did Julian of Norwich ever doubt if her showings were genuinely from God? It required tremendous courage for Julian, living in an age when women’s voices were rarely heard, to trust that her message was indeed divinely inspired and to articulate it for the people of her time and all time.

As we have seen, *Revelations of Divine Love* sprang from Julian’s sincere request of God to experience an illness that would make her

deathly ill. We have already noted her reason for doing so—to be thoroughly cleansed of *anything* that would keep her from union with her Lord.

Why, though, would an anchoress ask for purification? Would not living the austere life dictated by the *Ancrene Wisse* be enough to purify one? The crux of Julian's desire is not so much what Julian wanted to *remove* from herself as what she wanted to gain for herself. To Julian, living according to "the worship of God" meant removing everything in her spiritual life that was an obstacle to her relationship with God. She wanted no subtle spiritual blocks, no interior obstacles, between herself and God. While it can be difficult for us to imagine any sinful tendencies in such a holy woman, most of the great mystics became more acutely aware of their personal failings as they drew closer to union with God.

We can only speculate as to the nature of what Julian felt she should be cleansed of and stand in awe that the depth of her desire for union with Jesus was so intense that she asked to be ill in order to achieve that union. For those of us already experiencing long-term illness, Julian sets an example. We too can allow our illnesses, albeit not requested, to serve as purifying elements in our spiritual lives. Whether one is experiencing the physical pain of chronic illness, the stigma of mental illness or the angst of terminal disease, Julian has demonstrated the way to spiritual wholeness. Like her, we can ask to be purified, to "live more according to the worship of God," confident that while we may not receive "showings," we *will* receive an abundance of strengthening grace.

How then does suffering purify us, cleanse us? Perhaps there is no greater teacher in life than suffering. Disability professionals have a simple slogan that says it well: "Bitter or better." Of course, those of us with disabilities must be open to the grace inherent in experiences of illness and disability. We must be able to trust, to hold onto God's hand during the most harrowing of life's experiences, be it severe pain,

physical or emotional trauma or the dying process. God is there whether we are aware of the divine presence or not: “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). In my personal experience, pain has a way of sanctifying, of making every moment sacred because it blocks out everything except God. When we allow it, pain can teach us the value of tiny things—the delightful taste of cold water, the voice of a loved one, the face of a friend. And since we “see from where we stand,” almost every person who has lived with great pain or serious illness becomes more compassionate toward others who are not well. Suffering is often the purifying kiln which reshapes and remolds our hearts. It has the potential to teach us what is truly important in life: not necessarily climbing the corporate ladder or having a pristine house or a new car every year. These pale in comparison to the love of family and friends and the sacredness of our relationship with God.

Uniting Our Passion

It is certainly not a coincidence that Julian’s first showing was the head of Jesus surrounded by the crown of thorns. As we have seen, a central focus of the anchoritic lifestyle was identification with Christ’s Passion. Julian’s goal, to grow daily closer to Christ by emulating his suffering, can be incorporated into the contemporary suffering person’s spiritual life through many of the same methods the ancient anchoresses used.

By looking at a crucifix upon rising, choosing a certain amount of time each day to dedicate to praying with the Passion and inviting Jesus into the hardships of our own particular condition every day, we will grow ever closer in union with Christ. For example, the night before undergoing major surgery is a good time to pray with Jesus in his agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. When experiencing severe pain, think of the nails being driven into Jesus’ hands and feet or how he felt hanging on the cross. If feeling down about the anguish your condition causes your loved ones, look at Jesus as he met his mother on the Via Dolorosa and share with him your feelings.