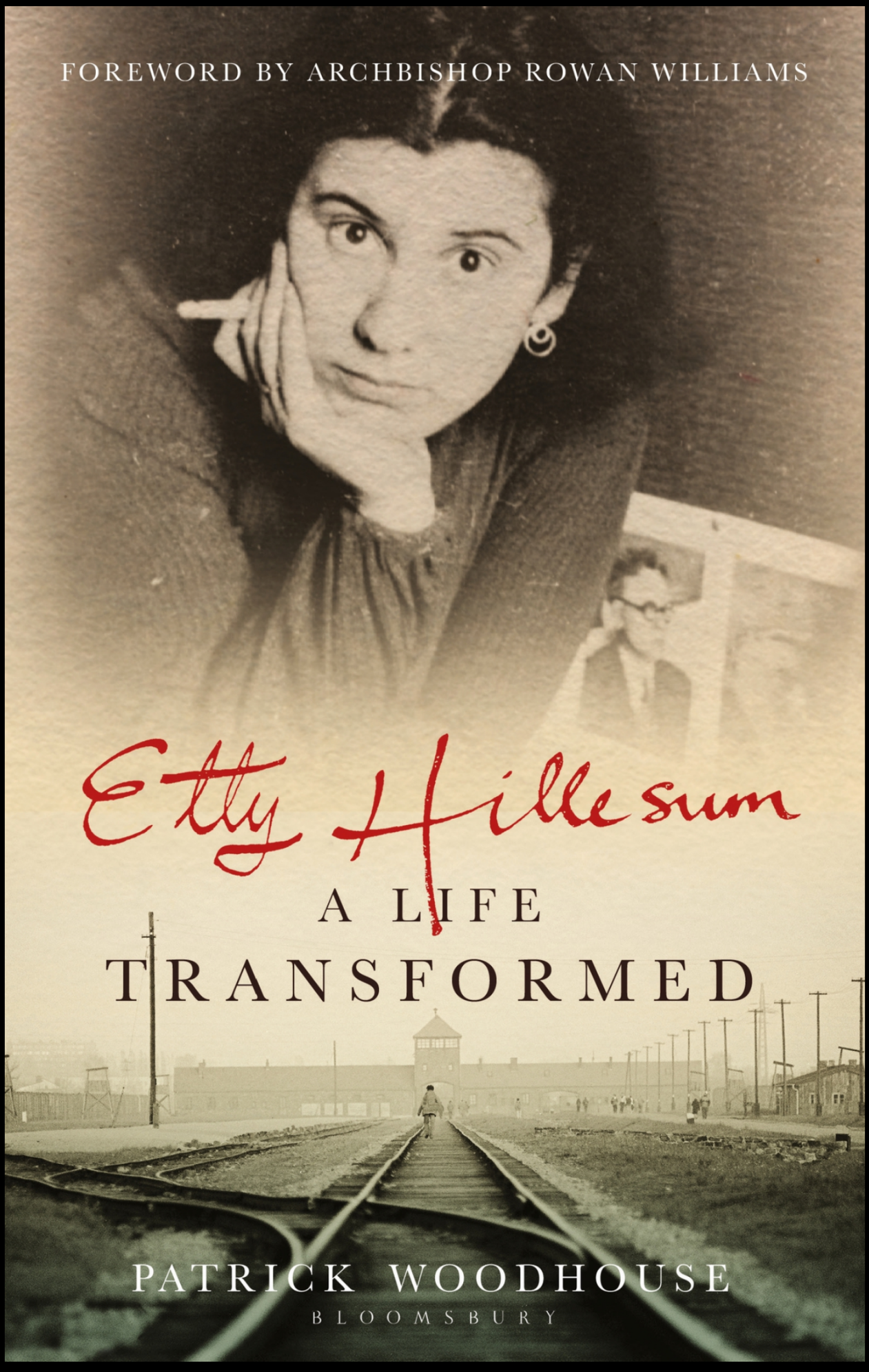
FOREWORD BY ARCHBISHOP ROWAN WILLIAMS



Etty Hillesum

A LIFE TRANSFORMED

PATRICK WOODHOUSE

BLOOMSBURY

Chapter 6
A Woman for Our Time

> *Somewhere deep inside me is a workshop in which Titans are forging a new world.*

In the town of Deventer in central Holland where she grew up, on the bank of the River IJssel, there stands a piece of sculpture in memory of Etty Hillesum. It consists of a very large block of stone – one edge of which is low and near the ground, suggesting the beginning of her life – which gently slopes upwards. Right through the middle of this huge piece there runs a jagged chasm which entirely splits it in two from top to bottom. The whole piece is a vivid memorial to a life of unusual strength and vitality which was violently 'interrupted'.

As you stand gazing at this stone in this place that Etty knew well, with the broad river sweeping past and the wide expanse of the Dutch landscape beyond, what strikes you is the insistence within the sculpture that her death, represented by the jagged chasm down the middle, was only an 'interruption'. On the other side of the 'interruption' of death, the stone continues and the second piece on the other side of the chasm is as vast as the first. This work of art is saying that though her life came to a violent end in Auschwitz, nevertheless it continues. The meaning and power of it flows on into our own time. It was not ended, merely 'interrupted'.

However, there is a distinct gap between the two pieces of rock, suggesting that for a time there was silence. Her voice did not speak. And that was indeed the case for a long time.

For 40 years her story remained almost entirely unknown. The only part of her writing that was known were the two long letters, first published clandestinely in 1943, which described Westerbork. Otherwise, together with millions of others, her life was consumed in the Holocaust. Except in the minds and hearts of those who had loved and admired her, and who had shared some small part of that life, she was lost for ever.

It was not until 1983, 40 years later, when an edited version of the diary, *An Interrupted Life* was published in English, that the world first came to hear of her. This book made her name known.

But for the English-speaking world it was not until nearly 20 years beyond that, in 2002, at the beginning of this new century, that it became possible to know her story in its completeness, for it was in that year that the complete and unabridged collection of the diaries and letters was published in English (the Dutch edition of the complete texts was first published in 1986).

It may be strangely appropriate that it has taken so long for her voice to be fully heard, for the story of her life challenges our context particularly. She has much to say to the issues of our time. This emotionally confused, sexually adventurous and intellectual young woman from a dysfunctional family, who was not interested in institutional religion, is a curiously modern person.

As we reflect on her more than 60 years after her death and hear her voice today, we need to allow her to sharply interrupt our lives, and we need to listen carefully as she invites us to find a truer and a deeper path.

There are four areas particularly in which she speaks.

First, she interrupts our scepticism about faith, and she invites us to believe again. Second, she interrupts our narrow assumptions about religion itself, and she invites us to pray. Third, she interrupts our easy hatreds of our enemy, and she invites us to see. Finally, she interrupts our despair about the future, and she invites us to be courageous.

An invitation to believe again

Etty's story challenges the profound mood of scepticism which prevails in Britain and much of Western Europe, about whether faith in God can any longer be credible in the modern world, and she invites us to believe again.

Her diary and letters tell the story of an adventure of discovery. There is an entry in her diary when, impatient with the 'primitive' word 'God', she gives it a new definition and describes God as 'our greatest and most continuous inner adventure'.[1] The energy, dynamism and direction of this 'inner adventure' slowly but surely, like a great river, gathered up all that she was, and transformed her. Out of chaos there emerged emotional coherence; the power of her turbulent desire was transformed into a passion to care; a commitment to truth became a driving force; beneath her intellectual and emotional vitality she found an undercurrent of wisdom; and in the secrecy of an untidy bathroom her heart's deepest longing was met in the practice of adoration. Finally, even in the face of barbaric evil, she showed that a life can find within itself deep reservoirs of a strange joy. Above all, she bore witness to the reality of a deep *inner* dimension to the human person. It was to the inner spaciousness of her soul that she constantly returned, and it was this quality of depth which enabled her to face up to and deal with the barbarism and hatred around her.

Her life is a challenge to the radical doubt and scepticism of our time. Not the doubt of honest open-minded questioning which is an essential aspect of faith, but the kind of doubt which feeds cynical despair, because it blindly asserts that the adventure of faith is a delusion, and so doomed from the start.

This young woman took upon herself the extraordinary responsibility of making God credible, even in such a world as Westerbork. 'There must be someone to live through it all', she wrote, 'and bear witness to the fact that God lived, even in these times. And why should I not be that witness?'[2]

Her way of faith

She fulfilled her task and was such a witness. And this witness invites us to explore her *way* of faith.

It was her practice of paying deep *attention* which transformed her. She first began to learn this on the brown coconut matting in the bathroom in the house in Amsterdam. The practice developed under the pressure of the terror until it became habitual. Through the months in the camp, as her contemplative heart attended to her inner life more and more, her direction was affirmed. She developed a deep sense of solidarity with her people, and she found she longed to care for the weakest and most vulnerable. Ever alert to signs of this life 'in all its thousands of nuances'[3] in the faces of those around her and in the natural world beyond the wire, she was determined not to be numbed by the cruelty but to go on *seeing*, so that she could tell the story of their fate. Increasingly she discovered that her practice of 'reposing in God'[4] released within her a deep wellspring of gratitude which at times was uncontainable. Even in the hell of this camp it would come flooding up from her depths. The picture of her standing in a corner of the camp, with tears of deep emotion

and gratitude streaming down her face, is an image, an expression of profound mystical faith.

Listening was the primary mode of her believing. As her time in Westerbork passed, this practice deepened in intensity, although there were moments when 'nothing made sense'. In her letter to Henny Tideman she wrote: 'Things come and go in a deeper rhythm and people must be taught to listen; it is the most important thing we have to learn in this life.' And the listening led to a greater yielding – 'My life has become an uninterrupted dialogue with You Oh God'; and the yielding took her in only one direction: 'I always end up with just one single word: God.'

This was her faith. Did it sustain her to the end? Faith must cope with what attempts to block it off. Following the long letter of 24th August in which she described the oafish guards loading their pitiful human cargo, she wrote to Maria Tuinzing that she was 'strangely tired'. One senses that the outpourings of gratitude that she had written about just a few weeks before would now no longer be appropriate. Perhaps they were no longer possible. She had seen too much. 'Now we've grown a little older', she wrote. 'We hardly realise it ourselves: we have become marked by suffering for a whole lifetime.' But faith was not lost. '… life in its unfathomable depths is so wonderfully good Maria', she wrote. And God was not lost, 'if we just care enough, God is in safe hands with us, despite everything …'

Her faith did hold her to the end. She left the camp singing. Our last glimpse is of her sitting on her rucksack in the overcrowded boarded-up cattle car surrounded by scores of her fellow Jews with three days' journey ahead of them. On her final card that she sent to the outside world, the first thing that she wrote was a verse from the Psalms: 'The Lord is my high tower.'

It is hard to imagine a situation in which faith could be tested further. Her life speaks volumes for what faith is and what faith

makes possible. She interrupts the scoffing scepticism of our time about religious faith, and she invites us too to learn what it means to listen deeply, and believe again.

An invitation to pray

The second way in which Etty's life interrupts and challenges us is over our assumptions about religion itself – that institutions own and control it, about the question that lies at the heart of it, and how we think about its boundaries. Drawing on its diverse wisdoms, she invites us to find and explore our personal practice of faith.

Her journey to faith in God transformed her life, *but it happened outside any religious institution*. In this sense too, she is a contemporary figure.

Her story invites us to recognize journeys of faith that are outside the institutions of belief, and it encourages such journeying. It also challenges those who work within the institutions of religion to reflect more deeply on why it is they are so disregarded, and to listen to those beyond their borders.

Large numbers of people in the western world, particularly younger people, caught up in the pressures of a restless consumer society, find that its barren secularism offers them nothing in terms of the deeper questions of meaning. They can feel they are in a spiritual desert – and so, amid the demands and pressures and pace of lives lived at the surface of things, there is a deep hunger for 'spirituality'.

However, this interest in 'spirituality', which shows itself in all kinds of different ways, does not easily fit within the narratives and expectations of established religious institutions. So, in Britain and Europe (the situation in the United States appears to be different) there is the paradoxical situation that a growing interest in 'spiritu-

ality' corresponds with a decline in institutional churchgoing. This takes us to what lies at the heart of spirituality in a postmodern world.

In a helpful article entitled 'The Crisis of Postmodernity',[5] the writer and theologian Philip Sheldrake suggests that there is here a mismatch of questions. There is the question which the institutions of religion still largely focus on, namely 'What or who is God?' But, behind the 'contemporary spiritual quest' there is a different question (though, in the mystical tradition, a related one), namely, 'Who am I?' The problem for the religious institutions is that, in their creeds, liturgies and often in their preaching, they are exploring and expounding an answer to the former question, which increasingly is simply not being asked.

The power of secularism

Secularism has done its powerful work in undermining the old worldview which traditional spiritualities took for granted and which placed the question of God at the centre of concern. Now, in the European world at least, the universal assumption is that the world, the universe, the human person and the course of history can only be properly understood in terms of the understandings of the disciplines of modern science. Quantum physics and cosmology will tell us about the nature of the universe; evolutionary biology will explain the world around us; biology, genetics, psychology and the study of the brain will unravel the nature of the human person; and the social, political and economic sciences will help us see and fathom the course of history.

This assumption has – with the exception of small pockets of fundamentalist thinking – become totally dominant in the post-En-

lightenment western world and, in many people's minds, has undermined and rendered irrelevant and even absurd, the notion of God.

Etty would have understood this. There is one point in the diary when, after an intense discussion about faith, she goes home and asks herself: 'Isn't it all a lot of nonsense? Aren't they deluding themselves? That doubt always looms at the back of my mind?'[6]

The question of the self

And so this question of God is no longer the point at which the contemporary spiritual quest begins. What drives that is the question – the bewildering, even mysterious question – of the *self*. Who am I, in the uniqueness of my feelings, relationships, reactions and sense of belonging or not belonging; in the very particular context of my life, my history and my possible future?

Religious institutions do not appear to have grasped the full force of this change: of the power of the secular earthquake in understanding which has occurred and which has shifted the focus of concern. They continue to behave as though the old worldview still held sway. They should not be so surprised that their numbers continue to decline.

Etty Hillesum speaks to the modern world because her journey began in psychotherapy, with the question so many others in various ways are asking: 'Who am I?' She began with the puzzling, disturbing enigma of *herself*, and her journey continued outside any religious institution.

Five elements in her journey

There were five key elements in that journey: a relationship of unconditional acceptance within which she felt safe to explore her

experience; intellectual exploration into the thought of some key writers, notably Jung and Rilke; the influence of her mentor, a person of faith, who introduced her to key religious texts, notably the Psalms, the New Testament and St Augustine, as well as several others; her own response to the urge she felt from within her, to pray; and the development of particular disciplines of the spiritual life.

Her particular pathway is a spur and encouragement to those who find belonging to the institutions of religion difficult. Whether or not a person remains a member of a church or synagogue or the institution of any other faith tradition, she invites us to go further in our *personal* exploration.

And her story invites us at some point to cross a boundary; to overcome what she experienced as a profound resistance.

The most intimate and perhaps important moment of her journey was when she first began to pray. She wrote that she suddenly 'found herself' kneeling on the brown coconut matting in the bathroom. It seemed to have happened involuntarily, in response to 'a great urge' from a deeper part of herself than her mind. She was deeply embarrassed by this and the 'critical rational atheistic bit' of her looked on in amazement and told her it was foolish. This is a key moment in the journey of faith: a moment when we need to let go of all our 'talking about', let go of the detachment of the questioning mind, and respond to some primal need of the heart, and – ignoring embarrassment and any sense of foolishness – dare to say 'Yes'.

Once this barrier is crossed – though the embarrassment will recur and the critical, rational part of us which is profoundly important will no doubt reassert itself – praying may, slowly, begin to become habitual, and even, as Etty found, deeply *necessary*. At one point in her diary she writes: 'I keep finding myself in prayer.'[7]

If we are to really enter into its potential – to discover where it may lead us – the disciplines of this life have to be *practised*. Like learning to paint, or play a musical instrument, it is hard work and cannot be learnt overnight. For Etty, her spirituality, her prayer, was about learning '*to live artistically*',[8] a phrase she took from Rilke. For this, she knew (echoing Rilke again) that 'patience is all'; patience and the practising of disciplines. And what are those disciplines?

- silence – 'there is a vast silence in me that continues to grow'[9]
- solitude – 'deep inside us, all of us carry a vast and fruitful loneliness'[10]
- mindfulness, in being aware of, and dealing with, 'the wild herds' of thoughts and feelings
- the use of images, learning both their power and their dangers
- reading the Psalms, taking just one phrase and planting it in the depths of the heart where its meaning can grow

and (for Etty most important of all)

- learning to listen (to 'hearken') to 'everything reaching you from without … and … everything welling up from within'[11] – the development of an intuitive awareness of what is 'most essential and deepest' in ourselves, in others, in the inter-connectedness of life.

All this and more was part of her journey, which, particularly after she had left her friends in Amsterdam and Spier had died, was a solitary one. In her letter to Henny Tideman we glimpse her loneliness. For this work of spirituality to be sustained, we need friendships and communities. We also need, once we have sufficient confidence to cope with it, the wider challenge, help and corrective that the relevant religious institution can offer to our personal jour-

ney. Whatever our reservations, it is the bearer of our tradition: the place where our story is publicly held and celebrated. We belong to it – and we need to share in, and contribute to, its life.

And so, as well as offering encouragement to those outside religious institutions, Etty's story challenges those who have the responsibility of shaping such institutions, with a profound question. How can we ensure that our liturgies, rituals and ceremonies breathe with the sort of contemplative spirit which will attract those outside the institution as well as drawing in more deeply those who may be standing hesitantly on the edge?

An inclusive ecumenical spirit

One way in which a contemplative spirit can be fostered is through reaching out to the traditions of other faiths. Etty had a wide and inclusive ecumenical spirit. In her quest she unself-consciously reached across boundaries into other faith traditions. Her example strikes chords with the modern seeker who will not be bothered from where wisdom comes (although the Church may well be). Etty interrupts our nervousness and says to us, *look wider*.

Those of us who belong to the Church have grown up within the boundaries of 'our' faith, as opposed to the faith of others – Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs. That is how we have been taught to think. There is a long and bloody history of fear and suspicion between the faith traditions of the world, of crusades and colonialism and inter-religious conflict. And this still continues, despite significant change and advances in dialogue and understanding in recent years. Nevertheless, still we tend to think only in terms of '*our*' faith, and mentally we observe the boundaries. This is understandable, for each faith tradition has its own narratives and symbols, arising from its own particular history and context. Thus

each faith tradition is different, and these differences need to be respected. But this approach can also be very limiting. We remain woefully ignorant of other faith traditions and we are still doubtful and timid about reaching across boundaries to learn from them.

Etty Hillesum was not concerned about any of this. The most fundamental theological idea for her lay at the root of the Jewish tradition: all human beings bear the Image of God within them, however buried and forgotten that image may be; all are created to grow into his likeness.

There are therefore no boundaries, and whatever can help in the digging out of this buried God from the heart is to be valued and cherished – it does not matter where it comes from. So, encouraged by Spier, Etty read the New Testament; she reached into the Gospels, especially Matthew, without any apparent self-consciousness that this is a 'different' tradition; she returned again and again to St Augustine – 'so austere and so fervent and so full of simple devotion in his love letters to God';[12] she kept quoting 'the Jew Paul' who had largely left behind his Jewish identity – but she is not bothered by that: it is his celebration of love in his letter to the Corinthians that worked on her 'like a divining rod'.[13] Her greatest love was for Rilke, who wrote the *Book of Hours* in the persona of a Russian Orthodox monk. When her little bag was searched on her arrival at Westerbork, there, lying side by side, were the Koran and the Talmud; and during her last year she read a lot of Meister Eckhart.[14]

Like the Cistercian monk Thomas Merton, who welcomed and embraced insights from Zen Buddhism and the Sufi tradition, Etty calls us to realize that insights from different faith traditions meet and complement one another in the depths of the heart of the contemplative where there is adoration of the One who is beyond all names.

An invitation to see

Third, Etty's story interrupts the easy way we talk of and envisage – or fail to 'envisage' (for this word suggests the seeing of a face) – our enemy. In our understanding of the primary conflict of our time, she invites us to bridge chasms of misunderstanding in our world and explore what may be involved in *seeing*, and so open the way to justice and reconciliation.

Her time was radically different from ours, but there is some similarity in at least the bare outline of our two very different contexts insofar as they focus on questions of hatred and attitudes to enemies.

As a Jew in Holland in 1941, Etty was faced with an enemy blinded by a terrible ideology of racial purity that was fired by hatred, and which aimed to destroy her race.

Today, the western world faces a terrorist enemy whose terrorism is driven by a deeply distorted religious ideology. This carries within it a deep hatred of the western world, particularly America. This hatred has led to terrible acts of violent destruction against the citizens of western countries. And in response this has aroused fear.

How Etty responded to her reality interrupts and questions the ways in which we may respond to ours.

First, she refused to hate her enemy. It is, simply in itself, a disturbing stance, for it means we have to think. To refuse to hate is, in the final analysis, to refuse to see someone, or a group of people – who manifestly *are* an enemy bent on your destruction – *as* an 'enemy'. It is to live with this paradox and involves – even as your country defends itself against their hatred – trying to pay attention to the wider and more complex context of their lives, and ask,

searchingly, why are they, and why are we, caught up in such hatred? Who are we to them, and who are they to us?

The enemy as a human being

Despite the clear understanding of what she faced, Etty struggled to see those who persecuted her, *as human beings*. She looked into the face of the 'pitiful' young Gestapo officer who threatened her at the registration desk, and she sought to connect with his humanity; she searched the faces of the oafish guards in the hope of detecting some faint flicker of life even in them. Just occasionally her looking was rewarded. Her friend Liesl tells of a German soldier whom she met in the street, who had pushed a note into her hand telling her she reminded him of a rabbi's daughter whom he, the German soldier, had nursed, and he would like to visit her. It was a small ray of light in the gloom of hatred. Etty wrote: 'Out of all those uniforms, one has been given a face now. There will be other faces, too, in which we shall be able to read something we understand …'[15] *A uniform which has been given a face.*

It was a wonderful exception. Amid the carnage of war, she kept looking for other faces. 'I try', she wrote, 'to look things straight in the face, even the worst crimes and discover the small naked human being amid the monstrous wreckage caused by man's senseless deeds.'[16]

Amid the monstrous wreckage of the atrocities we have experienced – the terrible 'senseless deeds' that have shaped the events of this new century – it is very hard for us to see the perpetrators of those deeds as 'small', 'naked' – i.e. vulnerable, and 'human'. But in all conflicts and attacks that is always the deepest reality which must be searched for. Hidden behind the distorted face of those who do such monstrous deeds, there is somewhere *a small vulnerable*

human being. Evil, she knew, is in the end only a mask, a gross distortion which can entirely obscure the true face of the person underneath, *but nevertheless still, only a mask*. 'No one', she insisted to Klaas, 'is really "bad" deep down.' On the day she could not see a face on the commandant who was sending a thousand Jews to their deaths, but only 'a long thin scar', she did not surrender that conviction. She never gave up in the hope of seeing – across the chasms of war – the face of the other who is human too. Like us, they too, are bearers of the Divine image however deeply marred and buried it may be, and so they are people to whom we belong.

To remove from the mind the label of 'enemy' is like removing the blinds from a window and letting the light in. If you will not hate them, then you may begin to see them. Those who wish to destroy you are human beings. They have stories to tell, and families and communities from which they come, as we have. They have been shaped, as we have, by their very particular personal and social contexts. Their loyalties, customs and traditions make them who they are. And they have sorrows and injustices and humiliations to cope with also – sometimes terrible injustices and humiliations.

This taking down of the blinds enabled Etty in her time to see war as human-sized, and so to de-construct its mythology.

Though stubbornly person-centred, she also recognized that wars and conflicts are bigger than individuals. People get drawn into systems which take them over: '… you cannot take your hate out on individuals', she wrote, 'no one person is to blame, the system has taken over …' By this she meant the Nazi ideology which had poisoned the collective mind of an entire people '… an ominous structure capable of crashing down on top of all of us, on top of the interrogators as well as on the interrogated'.[17]

This phenomenon too she invites us to see and understand: to deconstruct collective systems of thought – including our own – and

ask how and why they have come about, and what lies behind them. People on both sides of conflicts can become blind. All this is only possible if there is no hatred, for only then can we be sufficiently dispassionate to have some chance of seeing.

When the Germans invaded Holland and the persecution began, hatred became the currency of every conversation among the Jews, so they could not *see*, they could only hate. They could not 'grasp major trends', 'fathom underlying currents', they could not ask the question, 'Why?' And her friends didn't want to. They preferred the easy way. They kept the blinds up and just talked of hatred – everything 'clearcut and ugly'.

As one realizes the intensity of her passion to unveil truth, the reader of the New Testament is reminded of the words that are repeated again and again like a gentle, insistent invitation to the reader at the beginning of the Gospel of John: 'Come … and *see*'.

An invitation to be courageous

Finally, Etty interrupts the mood of our time and invites us to be courageous.

Courage was perhaps her greatest virtue. With courage she faced up to her personal chaos and found her self; with courage she went deeper in her journey of exploration and discovered the divine ground of her heart; with courage she refused to hate; and with courage she refused to hide, choosing to embrace the fate of her people and to lose her life. She shows that a truly human life is lived on the courageous and paradoxical path of self-discovery and self-emptying. So in the midst of darkness she found joy, and was alive in that place in spite of the power of death.

In the circumstances of our time, particularly amid our fear and pessimism about the future, she invites us, too, to live courageously.

Those who lived through the decade of the 1960s will look back – no doubt with a heavy dose of nostalgia – and remember it as a time of great optimism, liberation and experiment; a time of breaking out of the dull straitjacket of all that had inhibited life through the austerity of the post-war years. The 1960s invited exploration of a new future. With its colour and excess, its pushing against all boundaries, it was a decade that generated a feeling that change was in the air and anything was possible.

Forty years later, as we reach the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, we are in a very different place. That mood of optimism has entirely evaporated and given way to a deep sense of pessimism as to what the future holds. It is not too much to say that many people, perhaps older people particularly, feel – in the words of Etty Hillesum – that the world 'is in a state of collapse'. Not the violent, apocalyptic collapse that she lived through, but *a slow and steady disintegration of confidence about the future*.

This pessimism becomes focused on different concerns. Climate change, with all its huge and frightening ramifications, is the most obvious, but there are others: for example, the possible proliferation of nuclear weapons, or the huge question of the sustainability, in terms of food and resources, of a world population projected to rise from over six and a half billion now, to nine billion by 2050. All these can seem insuperably daunting issues, both for ourselves and for future generations. At a domestic level in Britain, pessimism tends to focus on symptoms of deep social malaise in what appears to be an increasingly fragmented and aimless society.

Speaking out of a world that was violently disintegrating around her, Etty interrupts our pessimism and invites us to be courageous.

She invites us to look whatever difficult situations we may face straight in the eye, whether they are personal or much wider, and to engage with them, seeking *life* through that engagement.

Integrating the negative

In her case this engagement involved the clear-eyed acceptance of what could not be avoided, a steadfast refusal to indulge in illusion, and the conscious bearing of sorrow and loss. She faced up to a situation that seemed entirely hopeless, and integrated into herself what seemed utterly negative, and it released her to face the present with courage, and to believe in the future with hope. This was her transformation. It was, as we have seen, a battle – she writes of it as 'a struggle' – but through such honesty and courage she was no longer a victim of her situation but became fully *herself*, within it. At the beginning of July 1942 she wrote:

> Yes, we carry everything within us, God and Heaven and Hell and Earth and Life and Death and all of history. The externals are simply so many props; everything we need is within us. And we have to take everything that comes: the bad with the good which does not mean we cannot devote our life to curing the bad.[18]

It is an extraordinarily inclusive statement. Etty claims that she carries 'God' and 'Heaven' within her, and perhaps by this she meant moments and memories of peace (in the sunshine outside by the chestnut tree?), or friendship (in her household?), or understanding (with Spier?), or community (the musical evenings they shared?). But she writes that she carries 'Hell' and 'Death' within her also: what did she mean with *these* words? Was it the immediate violence around her? Or perhaps the memory of friends who have suddenly disappeared? Or the sight of wrecked homes blasted to bits by bombs? Or the terror in the faces of children? Or the hunger and

the fear among the vulnerable old people? Or was she referring to the future which they all faced: the suffering and death to come in an extermination camp, which she believed could not be avoided?

All of these things she saw, or struggled to absorb. She held it all *within her*. She would not shut out the reality of what was going on, nor turn her eyes away from what was to come. Everything must be 'carried' within. It was all part of her.

But to do this – fully to accept the negative, and to live with such undefended openness to the totality of what life throws at us – takes huge courage.

The courage of despair

One writer who has explored this theme of courage perhaps more than any other in our time is the twentieth-century theologian Paul Tillich. In his book *The Courage to Be*, which is a study of the meaning of courage in the face of anxiety and despair as it is experienced in the modern period, he uses a phrase which seems deeply contradictory: '*The courage of despair*'.[19]

We may think of courage and despair as opposites, and assume that we have to choose one or the other, for they cannot live together. A person threatened by despair may determinedly walk forward into the future, refusing to acknowledge their despair in the fear that, if they do, they will be undone. All is well and all shall be well. This is their courage. They may for a time win out over their despair, but they will remain a brittle person, haunted by the fear that the despair may return, for it will not have gone far away. Or alternatively a person may surrender to despair and become overwhelmed by it, and curl up in a corner and wish to die, feeling that nothing can be changed and all is hopeless.

It would seem that the choice is either courage *or* despair. But what does it mean to put these words together and speak of 'the courage *of* despair'?

This gives courage an altogether deeper meaning. It is 'the courage to be' *in spite of* death, fate, meaninglessness or despair. It is about affirming life in the face of what seems unalterable in your situation. You do not pretend that despair is not there. You acknowledge it: it is part of you. *But, by living courageously in the face of it, you rob it of its power*. This is the courage of despair. To live with this kind of courage is immensely challenging. It is the challenge of becoming an integrated and fully human person; and, as we shall see, it is about more even than integration.

Remarkably, in one of her letters from Westerbork, we find that Etty Hillesum uses this expression herself. The letter, which has only recently come to light and is in the Dutch (but not the English) edition of the diaries and letters, is dated 24th August 1942, and it begins with this striking phrase.[20] Written over several days to a friend in Amsterdam, Hes Hymans, it is an account of daily life in the camp. On the face of it, the letter contains nothing that is particularly profound. There are no great moments of spiritual insight, no tears of deep emotion, no searing description of the train. But through it we see Etty in the ordinariness of her life, giving, in the face of the all-pervasive despair, gentle and attentive care to people. As she lives courageously in this camp, we begin to glimpse why she is described elsewhere as 'radiant' – why she shone. It was simply that, as she went round in that place where everyone was doomed to death, she affirmed and embodied life. She loved people and, against the utterly bleak backdrop of their existence, she offered warmth and care, humour and kindness. Even in the face of death, she would not be daunted.

She writes: 'With the courage of despair I shall try to steal from this day one hour to tell you a few trifles which even happen in the heath land of Drenthe.' She goes on to describe where she is sitting to write the letter – on a wooden bench with her back against wooden barracks and in front of her is the sight of waving blue heather. She writes that 'it is good to live even behind barbed wire and in draughty barracks if one lives with the necessary love for people and for life'. She tells of the greetings given to her from every side when she returned, which were 'unbelievably friendly, as if, after an absence of many years, I came back among good old friends'. (She had been away for a week in mid-August.) The letter describes the ordinary things that engage her attention: pouring out coffee, cutting and giving out bread, reading Meister Eckhart and scrubbing the toilets, walking round with dry biscuits and tea, listening and talking to a young girl who was nervous of sharing her poetry and encouraging her, 'and telling her of those things that are the most important in life', and speaking 'to many people'. She tells how she comforts a woman weeping on her right shoulder while a small child falls asleep on her left, and of the time she spends with 'very many old people. One was blind and one with a crinkly parchment-like face who was carried away on a stretcher.'

Amid this giving to others, the letter reveals her attentiveness to her own needs and those things which nourish her. She tells of taking refuge in her sleeping hut, for a 'person needs to be alone'; and she writes of eating red cabbage with friends and reading Rilke's poems from the *Book of Hours* aloud together, with one of them 'thundering' out – 'so that it sounded far over the lupin field to the de-lousing hut' – the last words of the poem: 'God, you are great'. As this friend reads Rilke aloud, she notices how he becomes 'progressively more youthful'. But the reading is constantly interrupted.

'More people come in', she writes, 'with many anxieties and questions and worries and we put Rilke aside again.'

Towards the end she writes, '… this afternoon more people will be coming, it just never stops any more', and then, playfully, and with a touch of sorrow – and here we gain just a glimpse of what she is holding within her – she rebukes the sun which has the audacity to go on shining over them in such a place: 'and the sun stands so openly beaming and shining above the heather that it should really be ashamed of itself'.

In this ordinary letter we see this young woman, gently and without any drama, caring, serving, listening, and – in this place of death – giving out life. Punctuated with gentle irony and humour, it is full of warmth and compassion. And there is no despair, except in the opening phrase. The despair is not denied: it exists, *but it is entirely swallowed up in courageous living*.

A revealing of God

Paul Tillich writes that such courage – the courage to affirm life in the face of despair; to care and serve and give and smile upon others in such a situation – is more than a revealing of the life of an integrated person. It is a revealing of God: of the power of 'being-itself'.

'There are no valid arguments', he writes, 'for the "existence" of God, but there are acts of courage in which we affirm the power of being … Courage has revealing power, the courage to be is the key to being-itself.'[21]

Tillich, who was born, grew up and developed his teaching career as a philosopher and theologian in Germany, was deeply conscious of what the Holocaust meant. He left Germany because of the Nazis in 1933. In one of his sermons, published just two years before his

death, he sums up what this kind of courage – so manifest in Etty's life – reveals: the power and triumph of love.

> It is love, human and divine, which overcomes death in nations and generations and in all the horror of our time … Death is given power over everything finite, especially in our period of history. But death is given no power over love. Love is stronger. It creates something new out of the destruction caused by death; it bears everything and overcomes everything. It is at work where the power of death is strongest, in war and persecution and homelessness and hunger and physical death itself. It is omnipresent and here and there, in the smallest and most hidden ways as in the greatest and most visible ones, it rescues life from death. It reaches each of us, for love is stronger than death.[22]

On 13th October 1942, Etty Hillesum wrote the final sentence of the diary which has survived her. It reads:

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