

In this exchange of prayerful hopes for peace and forgiveness in all our lives, Rochesterian Gloria Ulterino, responds to the journal entries of Etty (Esther) Hillesum, a Dutch Jew, killed in November 1943 in Auschwitz, when Gloria was just a toddler. Etty's words ring true today, and remind us all that we have the capacity to find happiness in suffering and to forgive even the most inhumane actions. As Etty put it, "hatred of Germans poisons everyone's mind... A few weeks ago, I had a liberating thought that surfaced in me like a hesitant, tender young blade of grass thrusting its way through a wilderness of weeds: if there were only one decent German, then he should be cherished despite that whole barbaric gang, and because of that one decent German it is wrong to pour hatred over an entire people." Read more...

The power of forgiveness

By Gloria Ulterino

"We have just one moral duty: to reclaim large areas of peace in ourselves, more and more peace, and to reflect it toward others. And the more peace there is in us, the more peace there will also be in our troubled world."

Are these the words of a woman who was protected from the struggles of this world? On the contrary! They come to us from the diary of Etty (Esther) Hillesum, a Dutch Jew, killed in November 1943 in Auschwitz. She has been described as a "luminous... radiant" compassionate woman, in and through her Jewish roots, her writing, and her growth in love and forgiveness in the midst of horror.

How on earth did she come to this profound place of compassion? That question haunted me as I ingested her diary and letters from Westerbork in *An Interrupted Life*. In return, I simply *had* to write a letter to her, as found below, in both

voices, hers and mine. I trust she will likewise leave an indelible mark on you as you ponder her ability to forgive, even the Nazis responsible for her death.

Gloria: Dear Etty,

I had heard of you... and read little snippets of your writing, enough to know I simply had to know more! Which drew me to your diary, written from March 1941 to the fall of 1942, *An Interrupted Life ... your life...* and also your letters from Westerbork — built as a refugee camp by the Dutch for Jewish people escaping the Nazis, only to become a holding camp for Jews, under Nazi occupation, before they were shipped east to Auschwitz.

But I was not prepared for what happened when I read your words. For you have made a home in my heart.

Here you were, a Dutch Jew, and I an American Christian—Roman Catholic; it seemed we would be so different. But, more and more, I began to feel like the truth of your soul resonates in *me*. Oh, I never knew the horror of Nazi rule... but... to my surprise, we seemed to have so much in common. We actually shared two and a half years on this planet—you died in 1943. And we seem to love so many of the same things. Books. Studying. And writing. Your phrase....

Etty: “I should like, as it were, to caress the paper with just the right word.”¹

Gloria: ...tickled me. And there’s our joy in little things... a few flowers... wearing a pretty blouse. There’s also the struggle to be comfortable in our own skin. As you wrestled mightily with accepting your flaws, you insisted that something in you was becoming more mature. To yourself, you proclaimed:

Etty: “Instead of living an accidental life, I feel deep down, that I have grown mature enough to accept my ‘destiny’.”²

Gloria: And you noticed that women are still perceived as the “weaker sex.”

¹ All footnotes come from Etty’s diary, *An Interrupted Life, Diary and Letters from Westerbork*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996). This is found on p. 1.

² p. 130.

Etty: “We are still tied down and enmeshed in centuries-old traditions. We still have to be born as human beings; that is the great task that lies before us.”³

Gloria: Oh, Etty, I see that too. And I keep on answering that call, along with so many others, to be a midwife to that great labor of women’s equality. But it’s your *compassion*, even for the enemy, Etty, that has stirred the depths of my soul. As you put it,

Etty: “hatred of Germans poisons everyone’s mind... A few weeks ago, I had a liberating thought that surfaced in me like a hesitant, tender young blade of grass thrusting its way through a wilderness of weeds: if there were only one decent German, then he should be cherished despite that whole barbaric gang, and because of that one decent German it is wrong to pour hatred over an entire people.”⁴

Gloria: How did you come to this? You admitted, in the opening entry of your diary...

Etty: March 9, 1941: “I seem to be a match for most of life’s problems, and yet deep down something like a tightly wound ball of twine binds me relentlessly, and at times I am nothing more or less than a miserable, frightened creature, despite the clarity with which I can express myself.”⁵

Gloria: So, what happened? A person... a teacher and guide... who also became a friend and lover... came into your life—Julius Spear. It was a complicated relationship that produced much good fruit. And ultimately, of course, it was God. Turning to God daily... every morning... more and more. Oftentimes you would simply fall onto your knees, calling yourself,

Etty: “a kneeler in training...” It seemed that I was “forced to the ground by something stronger than myself...I was still embarrassed by this act, as intimate as gestures of love that cannot be put into words either, except by a poet.”⁶

Gloria: You said it so honestly...

³ p. 34.

⁴ p.11.

⁵ p. 3.

⁶ p. 74.

Etty: “There is really a deep well inside me. And in it dwells God. Sometimes I am there too. But more often stones and grit block the well, and God is buried beneath. Then He must be dug out again.”⁷

Gloria: And dig you did... bit by bit...little by little...shouldering responsibility for yourself, with all your strength. In November you prayed:

Etty: “Oh, Lord, let me feel at one with myself. Let me perform a thousand daily tasks with love, but let every one spring from a greater central core of devotion and love.”⁸

Gloria: And in return you promised...

Etty: “to strive my whole life long for beauty and harmony and also humility and true love, whispers of which I hear inside me during my best moments.”⁹

Gloria: Were these just some pious words? Devoid of reality? On the contrary! How on earth is it possible for us to even imagine your reality? I read your description of one hellish night at Westerbork...and I sobbed...out loud... as men, women, and children were herded, like cattle, onto a train, week in and week out, heading east. On this one night, you shared the anguish of a paralyzed girl, afraid of dying. A young mother, desperately seeking someone to take her little feverish child so he wouldn't die with her. A woman fully nine-months pregnant, being sent to her death. As you looked, Etty, into the faces of the guards, now become bestial, I could feel your shudder. And ponder, with you, our belief that humans are made in the image of God. And yet, you insisted:

Etty: “I work and continue to live with the same conviction, and I find life meaningful – yes meaningful – although I hardly dare say so in company these days...And that is why I must try to live a good and faithful life to my last breath: so that those who come after me do not have to start all over again, need not face the same difficulties.”¹⁰

⁷ p. 44.

⁸ p. 70.

⁹ pp. 73-74.

¹⁰ p. 154.

Gloria: For you, then, suffering must be *real* suffering, not *imagined* suffering. It must ultimately find meaning in life. Here's what you meant:

Etty: "the reality of death has become a definite part of my life; my life has, so to speak, been extended by death, by my looking death in the eye and accepting it, by accepting destruction as part of life and no longer wasting my energies on fear of death or the refusal to acknowledge its inevitability."¹¹

Gloria: Whirlpools of hatred swirled around you. But you would not be partner to petty personal hatred. Life was *far* too precious. Yes, you could "see visions of poisonous green smoke"¹² in Poland... and yes, you could be with the hungry and the dying... but you could also be

Etty: "with the jasmine and with that piece of sky beyond my window; there is room for everything in a single life."¹³

Gloria: In fact, at the end of September, 1942, you named your deepest desire:

Etty: "Let me," O God, "be the thinking heart of these barracks"¹⁴ in Westerbork.

Gloria: By December, you could say:

Etty: "I sometimes think that every new situation, good or bad, can enrich us with new insights. But if we abandon the hard facts that we are forced to face, if we give them no shelter in our heads and hearts, do not allow them to settle and change into impulses through which we can grow and from which we can draw meaning, then we are not a viable generation...if we fail to draw new meaning from the deep wells of our distress and despair, then it will not be enough."¹⁵

Gloria: In the end you witnessed mightily to peace and love. Speaking of the Nazi's, you proclaimed,

Etty: "They can harass us, they can rob us of our material goods, of our freedom of movement, but we ourselves forfeit our greatest assets by our misguided compliance...True peace will come only when every individual finds peace within

¹¹ p. 155.

¹² p. 152.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ p. 225.

¹⁵ p. 250, from one of Etty's letters.

themselves; when we have all vanquished and transformed our hatred for our fellow human beings of whatever race even into love one day, although perhaps that is asking too much. It is however, the only solution. I am a happy person and I hold life dear indeed, in this year of Our Lord 1942, the umpteenth year of the war.”¹⁶

Gloria: How could you possibly say this? Only by staying in each day. Confronting and wrestling with “daily” worries,

Etty: “those many small worries about the morrow... hey sap our energies... Ultimately, we have just one moral duty: to reclaim large areas of peace in ourselves, more and more peace, and to reflect it toward others.”¹⁷

Gloria: Etty, your final words have left me in awe. Reflecting in your diary upon the healing power of poetry, especially that of your favorite, Rilke, you proclaimed:

Etty: “We should be willing to act as a balm for all wounds.”¹⁸

Gloria: And your very last letter, to your dear friend Maria, has left me with this continual challenge:

Etty: “If we just care enough, God is in safe hands with us despite everything...”¹⁹

Gloria: *Repeat:* If we just care enough, God is in safe hands with us despite everything...” Thank you, Etty, from the bottom of my heart.

¹⁶ pp. 144-145.

¹⁷ p. 218.

¹⁸ p. 231.

¹⁹ p. 359, letter dated 2 September, 1943.