

“Sexual Vulnerability and a Spirituality of Suffering: Explorations in the Writing of Etty Hillesum”

One of the more recent additions to the growing body of literature associated with the Shoah is the writing of Etty Hillesum. Hillesum was a Dutch Jew who lived in Amsterdam during World War II and suffered under the persecutions of the Nazis, ultimately dying at Auschwitz. Selections from her journals and letters were first published in 1981, appearing in English translation in 1983. Although Hillesum’s writings touch on familiar themes in holocaust literature, her development of a spirituality of suffering is uniquely intertwined with her experience of, and written reflections on, her sexuality.

Etty Hillesum was born in Middleburg, Holland in 1914 where her father taught classical languages.¹ After several successive moves the family resettled in Deventer, Holland where Dr. Louis Hillesum first became assistant headmaster and then headmaster of the town gymnasium, a school roughly equivalent to the combination of a North American middle school and high school. Her father was a stern scholar and her mother, Rebecca, was a Russian by birth who had fled to the Netherlands to escape persecution. Joined by two brothers, Hillesum grew up as a quite precocious, gifted adolescent. While her oldest brother, Jaap, became a doctor, and the younger, Mischa, a musician, Etty was drawn to the study of languages and philosophy. She left Deventer in 1932 to study law at the University of Amsterdam. After obtaining a degree in law she undertook further studies in Slavonic languages, and then pursued graduate studies in

psychology. In the late 1930s she took a small room in southern Amsterdam rented out by an elder widower named Han Wegerif who employed her as a housekeeper and with whom she would eventually have an intimate relationship. Several other rooms were let out, and an important community of sorts formed in the household.

During this time her interest in psychology led her to seek out a psycho-chirologist named Julius Spier. Spier had been a pupil of C.G. Jung, and it was Jung who encouraged his gifted student to pursue what then was thought to be a most promising field of psychology, one that sought correlations between palm prints and predictable psychological temperaments and behaviors. Hillesum, in turn, became a devoted pupil, client and eventually, Spier's lover. She also participated in a small community consisting of Spier's clients and disciples. In order to earn money on the side she gave considerable time to tutoring students in Russian.

By the time she began her journal, Holland had already capitulated to the Germans and by early 1941 the Nazis had begun to isolate the Dutch Jews. Jewish ghettos and work camps were set up, and by the close of 1942 virtually all Dutch Jews had been rounded up and relocated in the ghettos of Amsterdam. During this time Hillesum took a job as a typist for the Jewish Council, an organization set up as a kind of mediating body between the Nazis and the Dutch Jews. In retrospect, the Nazi establishment of these sorts of Jewish councils represented one of their most insidious ploys as it offered the false hope that such organizations could "negotiate" the fate of the Jews, serving to calm Jewish anxieties prior to their final disposition. She began work at the Jewish Council in July of 1942. In hiding just a few miles from where Hillesum lived, Anne Frank would soon begin her own diary.

¹ The biographical and historical material in this section comes from Jan Gaarlandt, "Introduction," *Etty Hillesum: An Interrupted Life and Letters from Westerbork* (New York: Holt, 1996), xiii-xxiv.

Because of her job with the Jewish Council and the influence of friends, Hillesum had several opportunities to escape Holland in the face of growing restrictions on the activities of Jews. Once the Nazis began relocating Dutch Jews to a transit camp at Westerbork in the Western part of the Netherlands, Hillesum sought to have her family exempted (unsuccessfully) while freely volunteering to go herself. While in Westerbork she worked in the camp hospital. Because of her prior connections to the Jewish Council she was given a special pass to travel back and forth between Westerbork and Amsterdam, ferrying letters and supplies. In addition to her journal, we have a number of her letters written from Westerbork.

Westerbork was not itself an extermination camp but rather a transit camp from whence over 100,000 Dutch Jews were eventually sent to Auschwitz for extermination. Westerbork was designed to accommodate about 1500 people, but by the time Hillesum arrived, the number in the camp approached 30,000. In June of 1943 she left Amsterdam to return to Westerbork for the last time. On September 7th, 1943, Eddy, her parents and her younger brother all boarded a transport train to Auschwitz. The last correspondence from her was a postcard written to a friend that she threw out the window of the train as they departed. A farmer would pick it up days later and post it. On the card she wrote simply, "We left the camp singing." After a horrific three-day journey the train arrived in Auschwitz on September 10th. Her parents were gassed the same day. The Red Cross reported her own death on November 30th 1943. Her younger brother would be executed in March of the following year while her older brother was transferred to Bergen-Belsen and survived the camps only to die during his return trip to the Netherlands.

II. Hillesum's Response to "a World in the Process of Collapse"

Hillesum's journals and letters reflect, over a 2 ½ year period, a remarkable development of what we might call a "spirituality of suffering." "Spirituality" has become a very popular

term these days, but its ubiquity makes it all the more difficult to describe. For the purposes of this essay, I define spirituality as the attempt to align one's life, and all of its concrete particulars, in harmony with a sense of the transcendent, a perception of ultimate reality. I will focus in particular, then, on the way in which Hillesum brings her experience of human suffering, her own and that of others, into alignment with her experience of the ultimate she names "God."

It will be helpful to begin with a brief consideration of her religious background. While Hillesum was raised in a Jewish household and her grandfather was a rabbi, there is little evidence that her family was particularly religious or that the Jewish faith played an influential role in her early life. In Amsterdam, however, she does acknowledge reading the bible regularly. And while it is true that in her later writing she admits to reading with great interest and sympathy the Gospel of Matthew, the writings of St. Augustine and the medieval mystic, Meister Eckhart, it would be misleading to characterize her as a crypto-Christian, as many Christian admirers of her thought have been inclined to do. The religious resources upon which she drew were, to the very end, eclectic and idiosyncratic. In fact, the most profound influences on her, apart from the tutelage of Spier, were the writings of Dostoyevski and, in particular, the German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke. Later, as she was preparing to go to Westerbork for the last time, she fretted about which books to bring with her and decided upon her bible, Dostoyevski's *The Idiot*, Rilke's *Book of Hours* and *Letters to a Young Poet*, and her Russian dictionaries.

The earlier entries of her journal reveal a rather self-absorbed young woman. These entries are dedicated, almost exclusively, to her infatuation with Spier, and with what she referred to as her "spiritual constipation," a malady for which she looked to Spier for a cure. She never forsakes her relationship with Spier, but her attitude toward him clearly changes. While early in the journal she fantasizes about marrying him, about "possessing him," she eventually

abandons that fantasy, though she would remain devoted to him until his death in September of 1942.

As we follow her development in the journal the early, introspective tone is never abandoned, but the horizons of her reflection begin to include, more and more, the tumultuous world around her. She writes:

A world is in the process of collapse. But the world will go on, and so for the present shall I, full of good heart and good will. Nevertheless, we who are left behind are just a little bit destitute, though inwardly I still feel so rich that the destitution is not fully brought home to me. However, one must keep in touch with the real world and know one's place in it; it is wrong to live only with the eternal truths, for then one is apt to end up behaving like an ostrich. To live fully, outwardly and inwardly, not to ignore external reality for the sake of the inner life, or the reverse—that's the task.²

It is this sense of balance between a contemplative introspection and a steely-eyed awareness of what was going on around her that characterizes so much of her writing.

Hillesum was acutely aware of the growing persecution of her people. Her response to the persecution of the Dutch Jews took three forms: a) an acceptance of her responsibility to chronicle this persecution and, b) the development of a spirituality of suffering, c) a distinctive conception of God and the life of prayer

² Etty Hillesum, *Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941-1943* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2002), 53. All references to Hillesum's writing will be taken from this complete and unabridged edition.

A. Chronicler of Human Suffering

Her first obligation, she wrote, was to chronicle the plight of her people. Rachel Feldhay Brenner contends that for Hillesum, as with Anne Frank, Edith Stein and Simone Weil, writing was itself an act of resistance.³

I shall wield this slender fountain pen as if it were a hammer, and my words will have to be so many hammer strokes with which to beat out the story of our fate, and of a piece of history as it is and never was before. Not in this totalitarian, massively organized form, spanning the whole of Europe. Still a few people must survive if only to be the chroniclers of this age. I would very much like to become one of their number.⁴

She wrote quite honestly about the horrors she witnessed, admitting that “sometimes when I read the papers, or hear reports of what is happening all round, I am suddenly beside myself with anger, cursing and swearing at the Germans.”⁵ At one point at Westerbork she encountered some particularly vicious Nazi guards and wrote of the experience:

When I think of the faces of that squad of armed, green-uniformed guards—my God, those faces! I looked at them, each in turn, from behind the safety of a window, and I have never been so frightened of anything in my life. I sank to my knees with the words that preside over human life: ‘And God made man after His likeness.’ That passage spent a difficult morning with me.⁶

And in another letter written from the transit camp in Westerbork, she recounts the horrific process of preparing young mothers and their babies for the next day’s transport to Auschwitz:

³ Rachel Feldhay Brenner, *Writing as Resistance: Four Women Confronting the Holocaust* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997).

⁴ Hillesum, *Etty*, 484.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 644.

Tonight I shall be helping to dress babies and to calm mothers—and that is all I can hope to do. I could almost curse myself for that. For we all know that we are yielding up our sick and defenseless brothers and sisters to hunger, heat, cold, exposure, and destruction, and yet we dress them and escort them to the bare cattle cars...What is going on, what mysteries are these, in what sort of fatal mechanism have we become enmeshed?... The wailing of the babies grows louder still, filling every nook and cranny of the barracks, now bathed in ghostly light. It is almost too much to bear. A name occurs to me: Herod.⁷

In the face of unspeakable horror she would still write that her greatest fear was that the barbarism of the Nazis would elicit a similar barbarism and seething hatred in the Jews.

B. The Embrace and Transformation of Suffering

This led to her second response to the persecutions around her. Hillesum was convinced that it was her task to embrace her own suffering and the suffering of others, to transform hate into love. She came to see this as her life vocation.

All one can hope to do is to keep oneself humbly available, to allow oneself to be a battlefield. After all, the problems must be accommodated, have somewhere to struggle and come to rest, and we, poor little humans, must put our inner space at their service and not run away.⁸

She did not advocate a docile passivity before the suffering around her but made it clear that “genuine moral indignation must run deep and not be petty personal hatred.”⁹ She wrote again from Westerbork:

I know that those who hate have good reason to do so. But why should we always have to choose the cheapest and easiest way? It has been brought home forcibly

⁷ Ibid., 645-647.

⁸ Ibid., 63.

⁹ Ibid., 358-9.

to me here how every atom of hatred added to the world makes it an even more inhospitable place.¹⁰

For Hillesum, where political and organized resistance was simply not possible, another kind of resistance was required, the resistance against humiliation. She was convinced that the humiliation of the victims was the ultimate intent underlying so much human brutality. Perhaps one could not resist the loss of freedoms and even the ultimate loss of one's life, but one could choose to resist humiliation and the self-loathing it brought with it, by transforming hatred into love. In the face of such hatred one must have the courage to remain vulnerable, open to one's own pain and the pain of others without losing one's dignity.

Such views might easily be dismissed as the overly romantic and idealistic musings of a young woman offered from within the shelter of her Amsterdam apartment. But Hillesum maintained this position even as she witnessed the horrors of Westerbork: the beating of the elderly, the heartless separation of children from their parents, the herding of thousands of Jews into suffocating cattle cars that would transport them to their imminent destruction. She was no naïve romantic. Hillesum struggled with her fears for the welfare of her family. The greatest anxiety at Westerbork concerned not the deprivations but the weekly publication of the list of Jews who would be on the next day's transport to Auschwitz. Each week Hillesum would fret over the possibility that her family would be put on the next train. She worked hard to overcome this anxiety.

This is something people refuse to admit to themselves: at a given point you can no longer *do*, but can only *be* and accept. And although that is something I learned a long time ago, I also know that one can only accept for oneself and not

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 590.

for others...I can only let things take their course and if need be, suffer. This is where my strength lies, and it is a great strength indeed.¹¹

Hillesum's journal and letters reflect the growing conviction that when suffering could not be avoided it could still be transformed by drawing it into a larger vision of life. This is perhaps the foundation of her spirituality of suffering. One must neither run from suffering nor wallow in it, but draw it into the larger horizons of life where it is always possible to find grace and blessing.

It is possible to suffer with dignity and without. I mean: most of us in the West don't understand the art of suffering and experience a thousand fears instead. We cease to be alive, being full of fear, bitterness, hatred and despair.... We have to accept death as a part of life, even the most horrible of deaths....I often see visions of poisonous green smoke; I am with the hungry, with the ill-treated and the dying, every day, but I am also with the jasmine and with that piece of sky beyond my window....Suffering has always been with us, does it really matter in what form it comes? All that matters is how we bear it and how we fit it into our lives...¹²

This spirituality of suffering involved the embrace of death itself as an inevitable part of human existence.

I have looked our destruction, our miserable end, which has already begun in so many small ways in our daily life, straight in the eye and accepted it into my life, and my love of life has not been diminished....I shall no longer flirt with words, for words merely evoke misunderstandings: I have come to terms with life.... By 'coming to terms with life' I mean: the reality of death has become a definite part of my life; my life has, so to speak, been extended by death..., by accepting destruction as part of life and no longer wasting my energies on fear of death or the refusal to acknowledge its inevitability... It sounds paradoxical: by excluding

¹¹ Ibid., 628.

¹² Ibid., 459-60.

death from our life we cannot live a full life, and by admitting death into our life we enlarge and enrich it.¹³

It is this frank acknowledgment that the acceptance of death is necessary for a fulfilled humanity that has led later commentators to take Hillesum's thought in such different directions. Some have wished to make connections with Heidegger's *Sein zum Tod*, "being toward death"; Christian thinkers have noted the similarities between her views and the Christian understanding of the paschal mystery, the inseparability of death and resurrection. Yet in the end, Hillesum's idiosyncratic thought eludes easy categorization.

C. "God" and "Prayer" in Hillesum's Thought

We have yet to consider two concepts that play a dominant role in many spiritualities: "God" and "prayer." Hillesum discussed both topics only tentatively at first, admitting that she was not sure what she meant by the word "God." As her journal progresses, however, she writes about both with much greater confidence. Hillesum's conception of God could not be confused with the awesome, omnipotent God of Job encountered in the whirlwind. Neither does her God resemble the maddeningly silent God of Elie Wiesel's powerful autobiographical novella, *Night*, in which he recounted his searing memories of his childhood spent in Auschwitz, witnessing the horrific destruction of both his people and his faith. In startling contrast, Hillesum's God was curiously dependent upon humanity. She addresses God directly:

Alas, there doesn't seem to be much You Yourself can do about our circumstances, about our lives. Neither do I hold you responsible. You cannot help us, but we must help You and defend Your dwelling place inside us to the last.¹⁴

¹³ Ibid., 463-4.

¹⁴ Ibid., 488-9.

For Hillesum, humans were the hands of God at work in the world. She located the origins of most evil in human failings, and consequently was convinced that the only way to root out hatred and evil in the world was to purge it from one's own life. However, she was not interested in developing a theodicy, that is, a rational justification of the existence of God in the face of evil. She was more inclined to find God in the beauty of the world, even in the bleakest circumstances. She would write of Westerbork as an experience of "hell itself" and yet later describe the beauty of God mysteriously disclosed in the same camp.

As for her views on "prayer," much of her later writing consisted of extended prayers to God. She included one such prayer in a letter to her dear friend Henny Tidemann: "My life has become an uninterrupted dialogue with You, oh God, one great dialogue."¹⁵ She prayed for the determination not to escape from the world but to find God in the world:

I sometimes imagine that I long for the seclusion of a nunnery. But I know that I must seek You among people, out in the world. And that is what I shall do, despite the weariness and dislike that sometimes overcome me. I vow to live my life out there to the full.¹⁶

Her view of prayer was hardly conventional. She found praying for oneself or even for another's well-being, "too childish for words." Rather she felt compelled to "pray that another should have the strength to shoulder [their] burden."¹⁷

I mentioned above the question of Jewish spiritual influences on Hillesum's thought. While some have questioned the Jewishness of her writing, Bernard Weinstein has noted a possible connection between her own view of God and the Jewish notion of *tikkun*, a cooperative

¹⁵ Ibid., 640.

¹⁶ Ibid., 154.

¹⁷ Ibid., 494.

partnership between God and humankind.¹⁸ At least one scholar has drawn some interesting parallels between her own mysticism and that of the Jewish mystical movement known as Hasidism.¹⁹ This movement was founded in 18th century Poland by a Ukrainian peasant who would become known as the Baal Shem Tov (meaning “the master of the Good Name,” presumably because of his uncanny ability to name the experience of God). In the midst of horrible anti-Jewish pogroms, the Baal Shem Tov advocated an almost exuberant celebration of one’s relationship to God. He was said to dance during his prayers for sheer love of God. The suggestion is that while Hillesum makes no direct reference to Hasidism, one can read her mystical views, in spite of their idiosyncratic character, in tandem with Hasidism as a thoroughly Jewish response to anti-Semitic persecution, emphasizing the cultivation of joy and purity of heart in a suffering world.

Hillesum’s journal and letters offer a rich and often original spirituality of suffering that avoids both a masochistic hunger for suffering and a fretful anxiety about its possibility. While protesting against the evil of those would persecute her people, she was committed to transform the suffering she experienced into a healing love. The final entry of her journal sums up well her vision of human existence: “we should be willing to act as a balm for all wounds.”²⁰

¹⁸ Bernard Weinstein, “Etty Hillesum’s An Interrupted Life: Searching for the Human,” in *The Netherlands and Nazi Genocide* [Papers of the 21st Annual Scholars’ Conference], edited by G. Jan Colijn and Marcia S. Littell (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 160.

¹⁹ Denise de Costa, *Anne Frank and Etty Hillesum: Inscribing Spirituality and Sexuality* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 233.

²⁰ Hillesum, 550.

III. Sexuality and Spirituality: “I am Erotically Receptive in all Directions...”

I would like to turn now to consider the relationship between Hillesum’s spirituality of suffering and her frank discussion of her sexuality. Throughout her journal Hillesum boasts of her sexual prowess. In her first entry she writes: “I am accomplished in bed, just about seasoned enough I should think to be counted among the better lovers, and love does indeed suit me to perfection...”²¹ She is equally candid in describing her simultaneous affairs with both Spier and Han Wegerif, her landlord. Early in her journal she confesses that “my immediate reaction on meeting a man is invariably to gauge his sexual possibilities.”²² Elsewhere she admits an attraction, not only to Spier, but to her girlfriend, Liesl, and writes, “I am...erotically receptive in all directions...”²³ Often she felt bound by her erotic desires and fantasies. She would admit that “If someone makes an impression on me, I can revel in erotic fantasies for days and nights on end.”²⁴

Hillesum frequently reflected on the meaning of her womanhood as well. She struggled with traditional gender stereotypes while often falling prey to them in her own writing. Her early entries reflect a battle with the feeling, deep within her, that she could only find fulfillment as a woman by possessing and being possessed by a man. She writes: “What I really want is a man for life, and to build something together with him.”²⁵ Ultimately she would reject this view; yet she continued to love both Spier and Wegerif. She gradually came to the realization that her spiritual task was not to expunge the sensual from her life, but only the possessiveness that so

²¹ Ibid., 4.

²² Ibid., 72.

²³ Ibid., 319.

²⁴ Ibid., 7.

often accompanied the sensual. Her journal is in many ways an account of the liberation of her sensuality as she strove to put human sensuality at the service of love.

A frank consideration of Hillesum's sense of her sexuality raises a number of questions: Are her reflections on suffering and sexuality two utterly disconnected aspects of her life, or do they relate in some primal way? Does one inform the other, or do they both emerge from some deeper human disposition?

A. Reflections on Human Passion

Let us consider the English word "passion." It is used most commonly today to refer to any powerful emotion or appetite. We often use it in reference to a deep longing or desire as when we speak, somewhat trivially, of "a passion for chocolate" or, more profoundly, of a "passion for justice." In this usage "passion" connotes a sense of life and vitality. Our use of the word in connection with sexuality and the erotic (e.g., "passionate lovemaking," "the throes of passion") is closely tied to this sense of desire or longing. This "passion" also suggests a certain vulnerability. The Merriam Webster dictionary lists as one of its definitions: "the state or capacity of being acted on by external agents or forces."²⁶ It is this sense of vulnerability underlying the word passion that I wish to highlight.

At the core of human sexuality is both a longing for and a fear of vulnerability. We long to be "known" by another in a way that eschews all masks, and studied projections. Yet we fear vulnerability precisely because of the risk that, being known for her we are, we might be rejected. Consequently, the principal temptation of all intimate relationships is to avoid vulnerability in favor of control. Yet, As Karen Lebacqz has observed, it is the rejection of

²⁵ Ibid., 33.

²⁶ S.v. "Passion," *Merriam Webster Collegiate Dictionary* (10th edition, 1993).

vulnerability in favor of power and autonomy that unleashes the destructive power of sexuality witnessed so tragically today. She writes:

Any exercise of sexuality that violates appropriate vulnerability is wrong. This includes violations of the partner's vulnerability and violations of one's own vulnerability. Rape is wrong not only because it violates the vulnerability of the one raped, but also because the rapist guards his own power and refuses to be vulnerable. Similarly, seduction is wrong, for the seducer guards her or his own vulnerability and uses sex as a weapon to gain power over another.²⁷

Both the power and the risk of authentic sexual passion lie in its demand for appropriate vulnerability.

Now let us consider a second meaning of the word "passion," carrying the sense of suffering. In the Christian religious lexicon one speaks of the "passion of Jesus Christ." This meaning derives from the Latin *passio* which in turn was a translation of the Greek *pathos*. This kind of "passion" also entails a sense of vulnerability—a willingness to undergo pain and loss. The only way to avoid suffering is to cease to feel, to anesthetize one's self. It is from *pathos* that we get the Greek word *apatheia*, "apathy" in English, which is literally the absence of feeling or suffering, the inability to be affected by another. Both meanings of the word passion, one related to sexuality and the other to suffering, seem to presuppose a capacity for vulnerability, a willingness to be affected by the other.

B. Hillesum's "Passionate Living"

This brief excursus on passion and vulnerability brings us back to the writing of Hillesum. Her journal presents the reader with a flawed woman who nevertheless embodied "passionate living" in both of its senses: erotic passion, and the willingness to suffer. Moreover,

her writing suggests that these two capacities may flow from the same wellspring, a willingness to risk powerlessness and vulnerability. Surrounded by a climate of fear, suspicion and hatred, Hillesum opted for a vulnerable presence to and with others. Her remarkable capacity to embrace suffering and death for the sake of others should not be separated from her willingness to explore the erotic and sensual dimensions of her being. For both authentic sexual intimacy and suffering demand the embrace of powerlessness and vulnerability that lie at the heart of passionate living.

Hillesum herself recognized the connections between her experience of her sexuality and her maturing spirituality. As she continued her sexual relationships with both Spier and Wegerif, in the face of her own real doubts regarding the morality of her actions, she was still convinced that her actions expressed her tender love for them more than any self-serving motives. Denise de Costa observes that “she did not reject eroticism or physical pleasure, only their attending possessiveness.”²⁸ At the same time, she contended that the true power of her sexuality and her erotic sensibility was its potential to be transformed into love for humankind. Hillesum writes:

Why not turn the love that cannot be bestowed on another, or on the other sex, into a force that benefits the whole community and that might still be love? And if we attempt that transformation, are we not standing on the solid ground of the real world, of reality? A reality as tangible as a bed with a man or a woman in it.²⁹

What she advocated was not the sublimation of the sexual drive but its liberation in service of the love of humankind.

²⁷ Karen Lebacqz, “Appropriate Vulnerability: A Sexual Ethic for Singles,” *Christian Century* 104 (1987): 437.

²⁸ De Costa, 188.

²⁹ Hillesum, 525.

Hillesum's highly developed sensuality, I believe, also led her to cultivate a particularly embodied spirituality. This embodied spirituality is another theme running throughout Hillesum's journal. She mentions her fantasy of writing a book about "the girl who could not kneel."³⁰ She had found herself, much to her own surprise, drawn to the posture of kneeling in prayer. This posture, uncommon in her own Jewish heritage, was for her a physical expression of intimacy and vulnerability. The journal recounts her growing to embrace this prayer posture. She frequently compares the spiritual intimacy of such embodied postures of prayer with sexual intimacy. She would observe about her having learned "to kneel" that "such things are often more intimate even than sex."³¹ Later she writes:

Last night, shortly before going to bed, I suddenly went down on my knees in the middle of this large room, between the steel chairs and the matting. Almost automatically. Forced to the ground by something stronger than myself. Some time ago I said to myself, "I am a kneeler in training." I was still embarrassed by this act, as intimate as gestures of love that cannot be put into words either, except by a poet.³²

And returning still again to the theme of kneeling:

It has become a gesture embedded in my body, needing to be expressed from time to time....When I write these things down, I still feel a little ashamed, as if I were writing about the most intimate of intimate matters. Much more bashful than if I had written about my love life. But is there indeed anything as intimate as [one's] relationship to God?³³

³⁰ Ibid., 148.

³¹ Ibid., 148.

³² Ibid., 181.

³³ Ibid., 320.

One is struck by her reference to kneeling as a “gesture embedded in my body.” Hillesum’s sense of embodiment, even in its erotic dimensions, often funded her spiritual imagination. Let me offer a final example.

At one point in her journal, Hillesum speaks tenderly of a moment with Spier in which he lightly caressed her breast and remarked lovingly on its softness and gentleness.³⁴ Several pages later she would draw on the sensual imagery of the breast to articulate her spiritual connection with life itself:

I went to bed early last night, and from my bed I stared out through the large open window. And it was once more as if life with all its mysteries was close to me, as if I could touch it. I had the feeling that I was resting *against the naked breast of life*, and could feel her gentle and regular heartbeat. I felt safe and protected. And I thought, how strange. It is wartime. There are concentration camps. I can say of so many of the houses I pass: here the son has been thrown into prison, there the father has been taken hostage, and an eighteen-year-old boy in that house over there has been sentenced to death....And yet—at unguarded moments, when left to myself, I suddenly *lie against the naked breast of life*, and her arms round me are so gentle and so protective and my own heartbeat is difficult to describe: so slow and so regular and so soft, almost muffled, but so constant, as if it would never stop. That is also my attitude to life, and I believe that neither war nor any other senseless human atrocity will ever be able to change it.³⁵

Once again, Hillesum’s sensuality does not simply move in tandem with her spirituality, it informs and deepens it. She evokes a spirituality that embraces powerlessness and vulnerability as something that must be mediated through one’s body.

³⁴ Ibid., 361.

³⁵ Ibid., 386. Emphasis is mine.

Concluding Reflections

One might be inclined to categorize Hillesum as a mystic, albeit one freed from explicit religious affiliation. Yet what sets her journey apart from many others in the mystical tradition is that as she progresses on her spiritual journey, we do not find a dramatic break from an objectively immoral past.³⁶ She does not renounce the world but rather embraces it without reserve. Neither does she renounce sexual relations in favor of some spiritually motivated celibacy. However we judge it, her fierce sensuality is never excised from her spiritual witness.

There is something important to learn from the life of this young Jewish woman regarding the liberating and transformative character of the erotic, sexual dimensions of human existence. The key to unlocking the spiritual potentialities of human sexuality is disclosed in the notion of human passion, which provocatively holds together a shared vulnerability present in the way we give ourselves to another in sexual relations, and in our capacity to suffer and embrace the suffering of others. However much Hillesum fumbled with these in ways that we, from our privileged position, may deem inappropriate, she has taught us much. Her writings suggest that this sometimes reckless exploration of human sexuality, while fraught with danger, may indeed activate that mysterious capacity latent within all of us to be vulnerable not just to our intimates but before the world. A passionate life will not always be lived within the clear boundaries which the great religious and moral traditions of our time set before us. To live with passion may well make the life of love messy, but such *passion*, whether realized through human sexual intimacy, or the arts or in any number of other directions, can give rise to *compassion*, a

³⁶ Caroline Walker Bynum finds this to be a trait distinctive to many medieval women mystics. She offered this insight in her critique of Victor Turner's theory of liminality, observing that Turner's assumptions about the processes of separation and liminality are more commonly found in male narratives of ritual and conversion than in female narratives where the repudiation of the past was less common. Caroline Walker Bynum, "Women's Stories,

capacity to suffer in solidarity with others. And as Hillesum dares to suggest, such compassionate living is trafficking in the divine.