



## Etty Hillesum and the Flow of Presence - PART 1

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### "Just Be"

**Etty Hillesum had to reintroduce or restore** the values that were under attack by Nazi terror. She faced her path with at least two sets of symbols: first, the language symbols that were part of her social reality, her upbringing, and her academic career; and second, the language symbols that arose in the course of her writing and reflection.

The relation between the two sets was complex. The second was derived from the first, but the first set could contain symbols derived from the clarifying process of other writers, such as Rilke and Jung. She reminded herself, however, that in the end she desired to become "wordless" and just *be*, that is, to *be* the "flow:"

Such words as "god" and "death" and "suffering" and "eternity" are best forgotten. We have to become as simple and as wordless as the growing corn or the falling rain. We must just *be* . . . I cannot find the right words either for that radiant feeling inside me, which encompasses but is untouched by all the suffering and all the violence. But I am still talking in much too philosophical, much too bookish a way, as if I had thought it all up just to make life more pleasant for myself. I had much better learn to keep silent for the time being and simply be. (EH, 511; EHe, 483)<sup>FN</sup>



It is a common error to presume that the symbols of Hillesum's reality were all clear concepts. Many of the things she described were not clear. The information produced by her direct environment was often contracted by what Plato would have called *doxa* (opinion; knowledge of phenomena) or Nazi "ideology."

Although she quoted extensively from other writers and tried to define certain concepts, Hillesum's diary is not a warehouse of definitions. Defining the complexity of reality was simply not possible for her. She was going through life as if there were, as she called it, "a photographic plate inside her" making a foolproof recording of everything around her down to the smallest detail. She was searching for her "tone:"

"Must find a new tone to go with this new attitude to life. Silence ought to be kept until that tone is found. But I must try to find it even while I speak; complete silence won't do, it's just another form of escape. The transition from the old to the new tone must be observed in all its nuances" (EH, 511; EHe, 484).

Hillesum was aware that her surroundings were poisoned by Nazi ideology and ignorance. National Socialism reflected the type of men and women of whom it was composed. Being able to see through its distortion, Hillesum had the urge to rediscover the true order of her soul within such an environment. This led her to express the desire for order, which she describes as a harmonious flowingness, in a society that was breaking down. Very early on in *The Letters and Diaries* Hillesum wrote:

I am at a loss to understand myself right now. Only yesterday life was still one smoothly flowing whole for me, and I was flowing with it, if I may put it so impressively for once. But now everything has tensed up again. And I had such high hopes for my writing, but I can't tear anything out of myself, it's as if everything were crushed between blocks of granite" (EH, 44; EHe, 42).

She encountered one type of true humanity within herself side by side with several types of disorder in her psyche, but she remained firmly convinced that the true order of her soul was dependent on the love of divine wisdom: "It is the only way one can live nowadays, with unreserved love for one's tortured fellow creature, no matter of what nation, race or creed" (*EH*, 671; *EHe*, 629). The experiences of such love became predominant in her life and formed her character.

### The Purpose of the Diary

The diary was an attempt to formulate the meaning of her existence by explicating the content of certain experiences. In the Aristotelian sense, she was a "mature woman" (*spoudaios*) maximally actualizing the potentialities of her human nature. Hillesum's writings as such were a "flow study" of human life within her own existence. She developed herself under all conditions and among different kind of people and was capable of an imaginative reenactment of her experiences. Hillesum was intelligent in writing and open to parallel experiences of others, and she tested the truths she had discovered in her concrete daily living. Her openness to dialogue and her personal honesty showed a great sign of her maturity:

Oh God, times are too hard for frail people like myself. I know that a new and kinder day will come. I would so much like to live on, if only to express all the love I carry within me; carry into that new age [with "new age" she does not mean "New Age," as the dawning of a new spiritual age, but she uses the Dutch symbolization of "*nieuwe tijd-perk*" (new epoch)] all the humanity that survives in me, despite everything I go through every day. And there is only one way of preparing for the new age, by living it even now in our hearts.

Somewhere in me I feel so light, without the least bitterness and so full of strength and love. I would so much like to help prepare for the new age and to carry that which is indestructible within me intact into the new age, which is bound to come, for I can feel it growing inside me, every day. (*EH*, 526; *EHe*, 497)

To "grow inside," to "go through", for Hillesum, was happening in "the now." Preparing for the new age is not something of the past—what happened before the experience—nor in the future—what happened after the experience. The process of attuning to the flow of presence, for Hillesum, was a gradual development in each moment of "the now" (*AAZZ*, 64-70).

### A Catalog of Her Experiences

Let me make a brief catalogue of some of Hillesum's experiences which, I believe, are equivalent to the classic experiences. She experienced a love of wisdom, an *Eros* toward the good and the beautiful; she desired justice and had the virtue to look for the right ordering of the forces of the soul.

She struggled with what Voegelin, following Plato,<sup>11</sup> calls *Thanatos*, the cathartic purification of [her] conduct by being placed in the perspective of an awful death. Through kneeling and writing, she experienced some sort of mystical ascent of the soul toward the border of transcendence, analogous to that presented in Plato's *Symposium*. She was part of a collective descent into the depths of nothingness in the holocaust. Among her friends she experienced something equivalent to the Aristotelian *philia* (love, *homonoia*), the nucleus of true community between mature men and women.

True "community" became more significant in Hillesum's development when she was able to let go of her

*Ich-haftigkeit*, a German symbol for "selfishness" or "self-centeredness" (AAZZ, 181-85). In the beginning of the diaries, she was rather a spectator, not fully participating in "community." She observed the reality of community from a distance, as an outsider.

When she gradually formulated a more positive approach to community, the fight with her *Ich-haftigkeit* now as an "actor," came to its climax: "It's very shaming that you, Etty, have once again become entangled in wishes and longings which are not even genuine yearnings. I'll have to reach clarity on this point first before I can count myself part of the wider community again, and that involves getting rid of one's egocentricity" (EH, 437; EHe, 416).

What seemed to have been impossible happened: "I am so much of a social being, God, I never realized just how much. I want to be right in the midst of people, right in the midst of their fears. I want to see and comprehend everything for myself and retell it later" (EH, 574; EHe, 542).

### A Catalog of Her Experiences (*continued*)

Since Hillesum desired to comprehend everything, to retell it and be right there in the midst of people, she was close to the reality of life. Did she become an authentic voice of experiential truth? Her experiences of love and goodness became the carriers of a truth to rival the Nazi ideology. Her opening of soul did not conquer any piece of land, nor did it prevent any of her fellow Jews being murdered, but through it, she discovered in her psyche a new center of love in which she experienced herself as open toward divine reality, which she addressed as "You."

She wanted to carry "You" intact with her and be faithful to "You." To "carry" was a significant symbol for Hillesum in a variety of ways. Besides "You" or "God," she carried, for instance, "her inner moods," "inner peace and balance" (EH, 224), "the day," "the other" (EHe, 281), and "the suffering of the world" (AAZZ, 128-36). "Still, I am grateful to You for driving me from my peaceful desk into the midst of the cares and sufferings of this age. It wouldn't do, would it, to live an idyllic life with You in a sheltered study? Still I confess it truly is difficult to carry You intact with me and to remain faithful to You through everything, as I have always promised" (EH, 528; EHe, 499).

Hillesum's psyche became the sensorium of transcendence with tremendous effect. The openness of her soul was experienced by others, since it encouraged the opening of their soul, "cosmic soul" (or world soul, *Welten Seele*) itself. It is hard indeed not to recognize Hillesum as a figure in her own way equivalent to those whom Voegelin calls mystic philosophers. She found herself in a new relation with "God" (You), discovering both her own psyche and transcendent divinity:

As I walk through the streets I am forced to think a great deal about Your world. *Think* is not really the right word, it is more an attempt to plumb its mystery with a new sense. It often seems to me that I can already discern the beginning and the end of this one phase of history, already see it in perspective. And I am deeply grateful to You for leaving me so free of bitterness and hate, with so much acceptance, which is not at all the same as defeatism, and also with some understanding for our age, strange though that may sound. (EH, 528; EHe, 499)

Hillesum actively tried to take the stance that one should banish "hate" from one's heart (AAZZ, 199-202). She believed that we cannot fight (the Nazi) hatred by means of hate. She especially reacted strongly to hatred against the Germans, radiated by people around her: "But indiscriminate hatred is the worst thing there is. It is a sickness of the soul. Hatred does not lie in my nature. If things were to come to such a pass that I began to hate people, then I would know that my soul was sick and I should have to look for a cure as quickly as possible"

(*EH*, 19; *EHe*, 18).

The true order of Hillesum's soul represented what in Voegelin is called the truth (*aletheia*) of human existence in-between what Hillesum herself refers to as life and death, on the border of transcendence. It was possible for Hillesum to measure both her human type of order and its social relevance. Abandoning all forms of hatred, she made it her principle that God was the measure and reference point. As she herself recognized, she was a measure of society only in so far as she was able to love.

### **As a Representative of Divine Truth**

In this way, she became the representative of the divine truth that streamed into her at the meditative center within her. The survival, publication, and worldwide dissemination of *The Letters and Diaries* have ensured that just as Socrates' dialogues survived his execution, so too Hillesum's experiential truth has outlasted her murder and continues to speak to us from beyond.

There is a sort of lamentation and loving-kindness as well as a little wisdom somewhere inside me that cry to be let out. Sometimes several different dialogues run through me at the same time, images and figures, moods, a sudden flash of something that must be my very own truth. Love for human beings that must be hard fought for. Not through politics or a party, but in myself. Still a lot of false shame to get rid of.

And there is God. The girl who could not kneel but learned to do so on the rough coconut matting in an untidy bathroom. Such things are more intimate even than sex. The story of the girl who gradually learned to kneel is something I would love to write in the fullest possible way. (*EH*, 156; *EHe*, 148)


There is a development in the types of symbolization that occur through her diary. She learned that exposure to unseemly symbolizations arising from the alienation around her could corrupt the souls of those who were trying to keep an openness to the transcendent. Hillesum's life was a tragic example of what can happen to an open human being in awful circumstances. She showed how difficult it was for love and truth (*aletheia*) to be socially effective in a distorted environment. The Nazis' murderous pseudo-reality provoked enormous distress in many Jews. Hillesum felt the responsibility of representing "life" and the truth of the soul to strengthen her people. She expressed this experience in her *Letters and Diaries*, and through the choice to be with her people even at the cost of her own life.

Her appeal to justice was an act of will, defying the distorted Nazi law. In her writings we find a crystal clear ethical judgment against Nazi violations of her family and her people. Notwithstanding this, Hillesum went toward her death in Auschwitz with love and compassion in her heart, and she also tried to persuade her friends not to give up on life but to cling to love in their hearts even as they faced death. Hillesum's love and justice prevailed against the Nazi terror: She "left the camp singing" (*EHe*, 659). Etty Hillesum felt that her decision to love rather than to hate represented the truth of God. She also represented her suffering as the consequence of the choice for justice and love.

*The Letters and Diaries* could be classified as a "history of suffering" and "passion." Hillesum was continually preoccupied with "suffering" in her own life as well as with the suffering of mankind (*AAZZ*, 288-94). She searched for meaning in suffering and discovered that by accepting suffering she actually received strength. It broadened her horizon and enlarged her capacity to be truly human. "There is much grievous suffering in Your World, God, I feel something of it time and again in my own life. And I am grateful for this too in the final analysis: the fact that a distant echo of that suffering should sound in me and help me time and again to understand and sympathize with my fellow men a little more" (*EH*, 273; *EHe*, 262).

Hillesum not only articulated the existential meaning of suffering but also had a sense that she was a representative of transcendent truth. Hillesum felt when she stood in the divine presence, she did so on behalf of her people. "To help" and "help" for Hillesum was directed both ways, toward others as well as toward herself (AAZZ, 218-21). Working on herself, helping herself to mature, was essential if she ever wanted to be of any use in helping others, she believed.

She was aware that for helping others you need strength and energy, which meant connecting herself to the "flow of life," the "inner sources" or "undercurrent." Through the persuasion of love, Hillesum helped other men and women become active participants in the flow of presence.

Her discovery of her psyche as a sensorium of transcendence led to a new discovery of the dignity of her fellow Jews as human beings. Others as well came into view with the discovery of the psyche as the sensorium of transcendence. By living the new truth she found within her, she brought it out into the small society around her; and with the publication and global availability of *The Letters and Diaries*, she has become the representative of this truth and the nucleus of an encouragement for a social order of love built on it. 

[\[This is part 1 of a two part article. Part 2 will appear next week.\]](#)

#### NOTE

(for fuller citations see the bibliography in Professor Coetsier's book)

11. Plato, *Timaeus and Critias*, in *Complete Works*, 1224-91 and 1292-1306, respectively.

#### VOEGELINVIEW EDITORIAL FOOTNOTE

Bibliographic references:

*EH: Etty: De nagelaten geschriften van Etty Hillesum 1941-1943*, ed. Klaas A. D. Smelik

*EHe: Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum, 1941-1943*, ed. Klaas A. D. Smelik, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans

*AAZZ: Van Aandacht en Adem tot Ziel en Zin: Honderd woorden uit het levenbeschouwend idioom van Etty Hillesum*, by Ton Jorna and Denise de Costa

Dutch terms appearing with the original text and removed here to a glossary:

To be alone ("alleenzijn")	new epoch ("nieuwe tijd-perk")
carry, carried ("dragen," "draagt")	the now ("het nu")
center ("centrum")	the past ("het verleden")
community ("gemeenschap")	path ("weg")
death ("dood")	self-centredness ("Ich- haftigheid")
desire, desired ("verlangen," "verlangde")	solitude ("eenzaamheid")
the experience ("belevenis")	soul ("ziel")
the future ("de toekomst")	a spiritual woman ("spirituele vrouw")
go through ("beleven")	strength ("kracht")
hate ("haat")	the struggle ("strijd")
To help, help ("helpen," "hulp")	suffering ("lijden")
history of suffering" ("lijdensgeschiedeis")	through life ("het leven")
honesty ("eerlijkheid")	undercurrent" ("onderstroom")
kneeling ("knielen")	values ("waarde[n]")
knowledge ("kennis")	whore ("straathoer;" literally, "street prostitute")
life is beautiful ("het leven is mooi")	wisdom ("wijsheid")
to live simply, simplicity ("eenvoudig," "de eenvoud")	women ("vrouwen")
love ("liefde")	world soul ("Welten Seele")

meaning ("zin")  
men ("mannen")

writing ("schrijven")